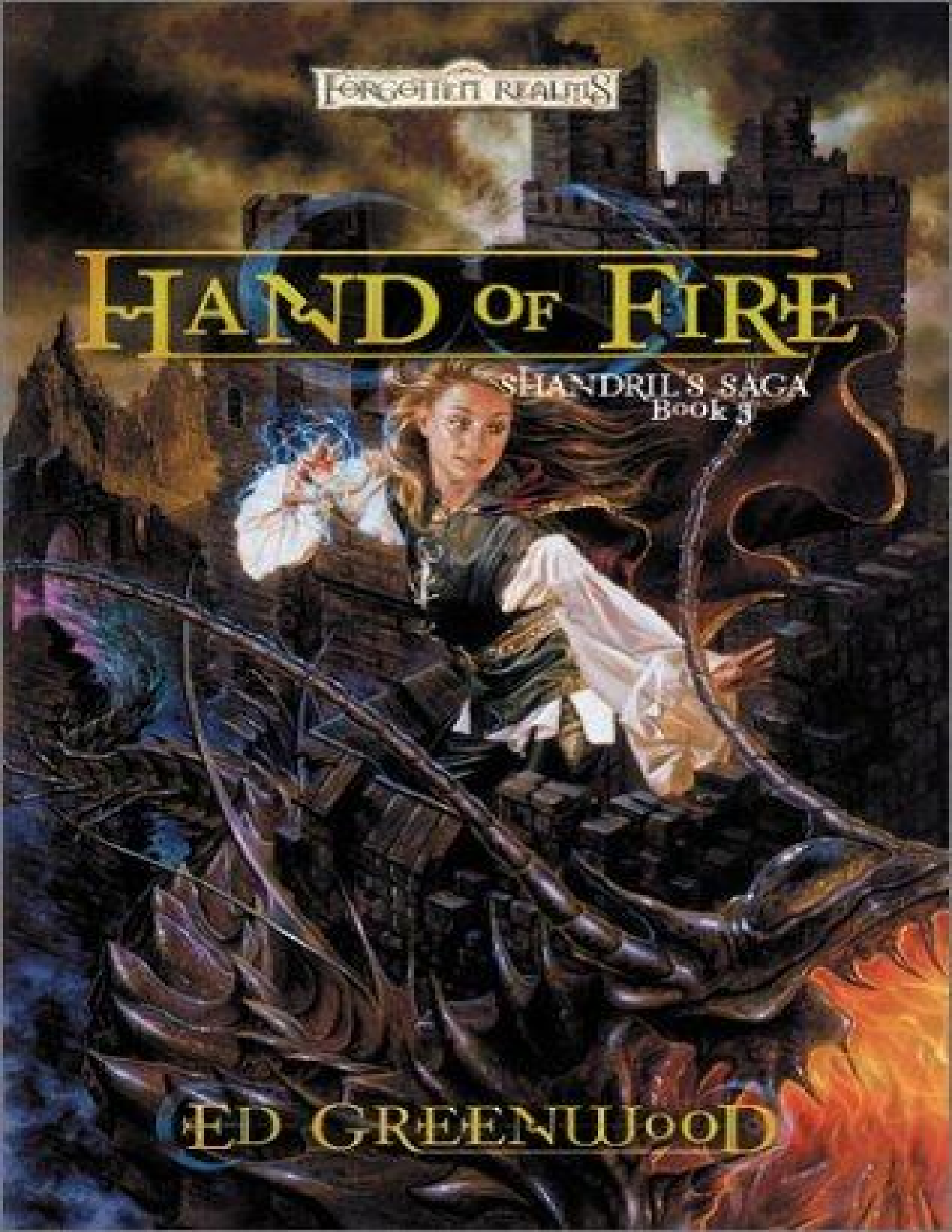

FORGOTTEN REALMS
HAND OF FIRE
SHANDRIL'S SAGA
Book 3
ED GREENWOOD

Forgotten Realms
Shandril’s Saga: Hand of Fire
By Ed Greenwood

Venit summa dies et ineluctabile tempus

"We're no strangers to pain, we who play with fire.
Masters of fire or great archmages alike
Sooner or later, we all get burned."

—The Simbul, Witch-Queen of Aglarond

Vera incessu patuit dea

PROLOGUE

The breeze was blowing strong ashore this night, bringing wafts of the salty seacoast tang of dead things with it—and bringing the stink of the harbor to better wards of Waterdeep.

Both of the men in the many-shadowed upstairs room over The Laughing Lass festhall were used to the smells; they hadn't bothered to light the perfumed oil lamp that sat on the table between them—nor called for ale or soft and affectionate ladies to serve it to them, for that matter.

The sensuous, coiling music of the dancers made a muted throbbing beneath their boots on the bare board floor, punctuated by occasional high-pitched cries and peals of laughter—but neither man had a moment of attention for anything but the man across the table from him and the items on that table. Only the occasional scrape of a boot heel from closer at hand—the room outside the door, where bodyguards of both men lounged facing each other in uneasy, silently insolent tension—made the two merchants so much as flicker an eyelash.

"Come, Mirt!" the man with the slender, oiled-to-points mustache said, just a hint of anger in his brisk impatience. "Dawn comes, and I've other deals to make. I grant the quality, the amount is ideal, even the casks are to my liking. So let's sign and seal and be done."

The older, fatter, walrus-mustached man across the table rumbled, "There remains the small detail of price. Crowns of

old Athalantar are good gold, heavy, and all too rarely seen. Them I like. The number of them on offer, however, seems less satisfactory."
"Six per cask seems generous to me."
"So 'twould be, were we at your sheds in Luskan," Mirt the Moneylender returned, "with me looking about in vain for someone else to take my wine. Yet—behold—we sit in fair Waterdeep, where men clamor to outbid each other . . . even for rare Evermeet vintages."
The man who wore the silks of Luskan—black, shot with irregular clusters of tiny white stars—sighed, ran one finger along his mustache, and said, "Seven per cask."
"Eight per cask and one crown more," Mirt replied, sliding the one small hand-cask that stood on the table forward a little, so that the Luskanite's eyes strayed to follow the movement.
"Seven."
"Seven and one crown more."
"Seven," the trader from Luskan said flatly, gathering himself as if to rise from his chair.
Mirt the Moneylender lifted an eyebrow—and calmly slid the hand-cask back to stand close by his own shoulder. "Have a pleasant day trading," he rumbled, lifting his hand toward the door.
The Luskanite stared at him. Cool, expressionless eyes
locked with cool, expressionless eyes like two gauntlets softly touching knuckles—then strained against each other.
There was a moment of silence. Both men drew in breath, a longer silence, and the trader from Luskan said flatly, "Seven crowns per cask, plus one crown more."
"Acceptable," Mirt replied, without the slightest trace of a smile on his face.
"Agreed," snapped the Luskanite, giving the usual formal response. He spilled the contents of a cloth purse out in front of him, planted his fingertips atop four coins, and slid them into the painted ring in the center of the table. He

reached back his hand and slid four more. In this smooth, deliberate manner he made up the sum, then reached for the hand-cask by Mirt's elbow.
"Not so fast, Bronor," Mirt growled, placing one hairy hand atop the cask and dropping the other beneath the table. "Like yer kind, not all of these coins are . . . what they seem."
Bronor of Luskan stiffened, eyes suddenly blazing like two green flames. "You insult my city?"
"Nay, Blood of Malaug," the old Waterdhavian moneylender replied softly. "I care not who sired ye or where ye hail from. 'Tis your coins I mislike."
Tentacles suddenly exploded through the air at Mirt, roiling across—and under—the table in a stabbing array, seeking to wrench and slay.
Inches shy of the walrus mustache and the battered nose above it they met something searing, which hurled them back amid sparks.
"A spell-shield!" the Malaugrym hissed.
Mirt blinked at the shapeshifter. "Come, come . . . you've seen such magics before, and used them, too. Why so touchy about yer heritage? Here we all thought ye were proud of it!"
The creature who wore the shape of Bronor of Luskan regarded the old merchant with furious green eyes. "'We all'? Just how many are these 'we' who know of my lineage?"
The old moneylender shrugged. "About two dozen traders in this city, I'd say. Yer secret has spread slowly, but any good merchant likes to know just who's sitting across the table when deals are closing. None of us sees any need to tell all the Realms, though."
Mirt spread his hairy hands. "Six years now, I've known—and have ye heard a word whispered in the streets? Killing me for knowing it, though. That would set tongues a-wagging—and Khelben and his ilk striding yer way with spells a-flaming in their hands, too! So put away yer tentacles, and let's haggle over these, ahem, altered coins, here. Got them

from Radalus, I'll be bound. Learn this, if you learn nothing else about Waterdeep: The man , simply can't be trusted!"
Mirt regarded the nails of his right hand for a moment and added lightly, "Unlike those of us who know how to keep silence ..."
Tentacles slithered back across the coin-littered table and melted into the shoulders they'd burst from.
"How much is your silence worth?" the Malaugrym asked silkily.
Mirt shrugged. "One thing only: that ye not try to slay, maim, or detain four persons. Myself, m'lady Asper—and the lass Shandril Shessair and her lad Narm."
It was the shapeshifter's turn to shrug. "We—" /
He hesitated, then added, "That is, those of my kin whom I associate with—had already decided to abandon all hunting after spellfire. The cost has been too great already."
Showing his teeth in a sharklike smile, he added, "After the long slaughter is done and the last survivor holds
spellfire in wounded hands . . . then it will be time to snatch the prize."
Mirt regarded him with old, calm eyes. "And ye'll break this agreement with me without hesitation or thought for the cost I may make ye pay?"
The false merchant shook his head. "I won't need to. When the Zhents stop using their wastrel magelings and the Cult its ambitious fools, and attack in earnest, there's little chance of the survivor being an overly lucky kitchenmaid from Highmoon named Shandril Shessair."

MORE SPARKS FOR THE RISING FIRE

I've always had a particular hatred far foes who attack by night. Don't they know a Realms-rescuing hero needs his sleep?
Mirt of Waterdeep
Lines I've Lived By
Year of the Harp

Shandril came awake knowing they were no longer alone. She was aware of a presence, of being watched from very close by ... even before Narm's hand clutched her thigh in a clawlike warning under the sleeping-furs.

Tessaril had promised that this chamber at least, of all the Hidden House, was safe, warded with the strongest spells she could muster. That meant someone had broken the power—and probably ended the life—of the lady mage who'd been so kind to them.

The Lord of Eveningstar must be dead.

Dead ... or less a loyal friend than she'd seemed.

Without moving or opening her eyes properly, Shandnl tried to peer through lowered lashes at all of the small, cozy, tapestry-hung bedchamber around her.

Someone was standing at the foot of the bed. No, two someones.

"Shan," came a low, gentle voice she knew, from one of them. "Shan, I know you're awake. Please do nothing hasty —let there yet be peace between us."

Tessaril! Treachery!

With a wild shriek Shandril flung herself into the air, using spellfire to propel herself aloft out of a tangle of the sleeping-furs blazing up in flames. Narm cursed as he ducked and twisted away from them.

A wizard had been glaring down at Shan as she slept. He was shorter and much stouter than Elminster, with a high, wrinkled forehead, knowing eyes, and a beard streaked with black, gray, and white hairs, doing battle together on his chin. He had a jowly face, bristling eyebrows, many years on his shoulders, rich garments, and an imperious look. Shandril hated him on sight. Tessaril Winter was standing at his side, a drawn sword in her hand, its slender blade glowing with awakened magic.

"Traitor!" Shandril spat at her, pointing with a finger that flamed with spellfire. The palm of her other hand filled with searing flames, ready to hurl, as she turned to the wizard

and snarled, "Mutter one word of a spell—just one—and I'll blast you to ashes, whoever you are!"
The old wizard nodded very slightly and said nothing.
The Lady Lord of Eveningstar shook her head sadly. "Did I not tell you I'd never betray you, Shan? I meant it. I always mean what I say."
"How can I trust that, when one spell from him and we could be dead?" Shandril growled, wrestling her fury down so no more of the room around would be burned.
Narm had kicked the smoldering furs onto bare flagstones and now crouched uneasily beside the bed, naked and too far from his clothes to even snatch up his belt-knife—but very much wanting to.
Shan let herself sink down until her bare feet were planted on the bed once more, spellfire still raging ready around her hands. Narm hastily scrambled up to stand beside her, raising his own hands to cast—he frowned— whatever paltry magic might be most useful.
"Be easy, both of you," the wizard grunted. "I've not come to do you harm. We've spoken before—when the King gave you his royal blessing, remember? I'm Vangerdahast, Court Wizard and Royal Magician of Cormyr, and a chamber-load of other titles besides . . . and I'd like to see the pair of you safely out of Cormyr before you turn into another problem for me. I collect problems and find I have more than enough on my hands just now without the little lass some amused god gave spellfire to—and an overswift temper, it seems."
"Oh?" Narm asked, his tone half a challenge and half-curious. "So why creep in here? And, Lady Lord, why the ready steel and risen magic on it?"
Tessaril shrugged. "We had an ... interesting journey hither through the Hidden House. Things dwell here that, ah, respond to the Royal Magician's presence."
Vangerdahast grunted wordless agreement to the Lady Lord's words and strode around the bed toward Shandril, clasping his hands behind his back and peering at the two

naked folk standing on the tangled bed like a slaver surveying wares he's thinking of buying.
"So you're here to—?" Shandril asked sharply, crouching to point both her hands at his face like loaded crossbows, her spellfire flaring warningly.
"Cast a magical disguise on you both," he replied, ignoring the menacing flames dancing not all that far from his nose.
Calmly he gazed past them, studying Narm until the young mage blushed.
Vangerdahast promptly waved at Narm in an imperious "turn around" gesture and nodded when the young mage hesitantly complied. "No personal marks or brands or the like. Good. Now you, lass."
Shandril gave him an angry look. "Must every wizard I meet gloat over my bare flesh?"
"No," Vangerdahast replied—a little wearily, Shan thought. "Just the ones who have to see the body they're trying to disguise, to weave a good spell and not merely a swift and easy one. And this lucky lad of yours, too, I suppose. Gods above, girl, how many unclad women d'you think I've seen, in all the years of serving the king?"
"Ah," Narm said, eager to find something to say that wasn't cold word-dueling or menace, "so all the tales are true!"
"Those tales and a lot more besides," Vangerdahast told him gravely, "but if it keeps the Dragon of Cormyr from being a tyrant to the good folk of his kingdom and away from his war-saddle and all the graves that follow in the wake of such ridings, he can craft a dozen new tales every night with my full blessing!"
He came back around the bed to look at Narm directly "You'll learn, lad, to count lives wasted and stalking fear and blood spilled and broken trust as far greater sins than a little rutting, if you live long enough to use your eyes. Now, turn around again. I need a good look at your scrawny backside if I'm to spin a good false seeming for you."
"You were followed?"

"Of course. This is Scornubel, Thoadrin."
"And so?"
"And so," the slender man in dark leather replied with a crooked smile, holding up a wicked little knife that Thoadrin hadn't seen him draw from a sheath anywhere, "this drank thrice. The last one was merely an opportunist who hoped to catch me in a vulnerable moment, during a fight. His hopes were met; he did."
"You're hurt?" Thoadrin asked sharply.
The slender man flipped long black hair back out of his eyes with a languid toss of his head and smiled more brightly. "One mask, sliced to ribbons. Itvpains me—my old foe had three quara in his purse, and even a crude replacement will cost me at least five."
Thoadrin sighed. "Marlel, can't you ever be serious?"
"Oh, now, Thoadrin," Marlel said softly, "don't make that dangerous mistake. I'm always serious." Somehow the little knife had vanished again, though the Cult warrior hadn't seen it go.
Thoadrin frowned. "The masks, the skulking, all these grand passwords and scrawled warning messages on doors—that's tavern-tale stuff. We of the Scaly Way—"
"—Prefer grim sinister silence, when you're not on your knees in front of dragons made of dancing bones. Each to his own style, Thoadrin. Mine amuses many folk, makes most of them underestimate me, and affords me some passing entertainment. 'Tis good heralding, too. As far away as Sembia, folk have heard of Marlel, the Dark Blade of Doom!"
Thoadrin winced. "Aye, so they have, as a mincing dandy or a crazed-wits, I fear. Doubting such gabble could properly apply to a man of your profession who flourished for more than five seasons before this, I preferred to trust Scornubrian sources—persons I've dealt with in confidence and to mutual benefit for years." , -
"And they told you?"
"That you were the best, bar none. One or two of the ladies

went so far as to underscore that their testimonial applied in several ways."
Marlel gave the Cult warrior his crooked smile again and said, "But of course."
Thoadrin cleared his throat. "You've probably guessed why I'm here."
Marlel shrugged. "I try never to guess. I'm, here because the Cult of the Dragon pays me a retainer of far too many gems each month for me to ignore a summons from anyone claiming to be a member of the Cult. Moreover, my keep-confidence Scornubrian sources tell me you're highly placed in . the ranks of the practical side of the Cult—the men who invest coins and watch and deal with the passing world, rather than the raving spellhurlers and those who writhe about in dragonbones, lost in raptures. So here I am, confident that you've a task of importance for me."
The Dark Blade of Doom glanced around the tiny turret room and out its lone door past the crossed glaives of the impassive guards standing to each side of that entry, past the second pair of glaives held by the matching pair of guards on the other side of the door—and into the hard stare of the guard with the loaded crossbow, who stood beyond the glaive-bearers, facing into the room. "Unless all this tavern-tale stuff, to borrow a phrase," he added lightly, "is your habitual style when meeting slayers-for-hire, Thoadrin."
The Cult warrior sighed, raised his large and ornate goblet to his lips, and said, "Say that it isn't, so that you have made a judgment—a guess, if you will. Say further that you're in a strange mood and desire to try to guess, for once, at what task I've come so far to hire you for. What would your guess be?"
Marlel regarded Thoadrin impassively for a very short moment of silence ere he said firmly, "Spellfire." ,
The Cult warrior nodded but said nothing.
The Dark Blade of Doom smiled thinly, then leaned back in his chair, brought languid booted legs up onto the tabletop,

crossed them, and said softly, "The lass who has it is coming this way. You want me to capture her for you sometime while she's passing within reach. You're going to offer me a staggering amount in gems for delivering this Shandri] Shessair into your hands—bound and senseless or spell-thralled."

Thoadrin lifted his eyebrows. "For someone who tries never to guess, you do it very well."

Marlel shrugged. "I do everything very well."

Thoadrin of the Cult made a face, but it might have been the wine. He set his goblet back down and asked, "Do you accept this task?"

"Of course. However, feel fre^e to awe me with your offer of payment."

Thoadrin lifted his fingers in a signal to the guard with the crossbow, who relayed it to someone unseen without taking his eyes off the two men at the table for a moment.

Overhead, there was a sudden rattling sound—that became a clacking of wooden things in motion.

"Try," Thoadrin told the slayer-for-hire, "to avoid any tavern-tale remarks for the next few breaths, hey?"

The Dark Blade of Doom waved a hand in agreement. "You're paying," he said simply—as the winch let go in earnest and the bundle from the next floor came down at their heads like hail being hurled in a storm.

It bounced in its net of ropes, just above the tabletop—Thoadrin hastily rescued his goblet—and came to a stop in the air between their eyes: a coffer of ornate, chased electrum, a trio of keys projecting from its row of tiny locks.

Thoadrin waved at it, but Marlel shook his head and gestured to the Cult warrior to fetch it out of the ropes himself. "I never meddle with another man's traps," he explained.

The Cult warrior frowned and lifted the coffer out onto the table. With a flourish he threw back the lid and turned the coffer until the slayer could see the gleaming heap of cold

crimson fire within.
"Calishite rubies of the finest cut and clarity," he explained, for all the world as if he was a jeweler hawking stones from a market stall. "A thousand of them in this coffer."
" Tis but half, yes? The balance to come when the task is done?" '
Thoadrin smiled a little weakly. "Of course. As is standard in ... matters like this."
Marlel smiled his crooked smile. 'Tou can omit the other standard feature of such payments: the attempt to slay the man collecting them. I'm sure you had no such intention, but just as fair warning: don't. Ever. For I am the Dark Blade of Doom."
Thoadrin of the Cult inclined his head and said simply, "No such treachery is contemplated, or will be."
"And the other practice I regard as treachery?" Marlel asked. "Hiring someone else to attempt the same task while I'm under hire? Or to cut me down after I make capture but before I can bring the captive to you?"
The Cult warrior scowled. "I'm not accustomed to enacting such fool-headed business practices. They might work for someone who knows he'll be dead on the morrow—but not for me. I intend to be spinning coins for the Followers thirty years from now."
"Understood." Marlel slid a folded armorweave sack out of one leg-pouch, and tipped the coffer until its shining flood of rubies began to flow into the sack. "I hope you'll not take offense if I leave you your valuable coffer and take the rubies away in this." -
"None taken," Thoadrin replied, raising his goblet again in smoothly steady hands. "I do have one professional question, though."
Marlel raised his eyebrows in silent query.
"How do you plan to ... get the deed done?"
The Cult warrior sounded genuinely curious. The Dark Blade of Doom smiled his crooked smile and answered, "With,

among other things, this."
He held out one lazy, long-fingered hand. In it gleamed something small, curved, and silver: a Harper badge.
There was a moment of chill blue mists, with nothing beneath their boots and the sensation of softly, endlessly falling . . . then the light changed around them, and small stones scraped solidly under their boots amid scrub grass. They were standing in unfamiliar wilderlands, gazing out from a hilltop across rolling hills beyond number, those ahead and to the right crowned by ragged forests.
"You're looking north," Tessaril murmured from beside Shandril's shoulder. "If you go north, on that road down there—" she pointed off to the left with her drawn sword at a distant ribbon of ruts, whereon a line of wagons could be seen crawling, like so many fat white ants "—the ferry to Scornubel is less than half a day from here." She turned and pointed in another direction with her blade. "If you go down from these heights that way, following the brook, you won't be seen from afar. Stay on this side of the water, and it'll take you right down to the ditch beside the road."
The two fat priestesses of Chauntea who stood with the Lord of Eveningstar exchanged glances, then looked back at Tessaril and nodded in unison.
"Take the ferry," one of them murmured, "and find The Stormy Tankard on Hethbridle Street. Ask there for Orthil Voldovan and join his caravan to Waterdeep. In Waterdeep, go to Altarea's Needles, a waterproofing and seamstress shop in Dock Ward, and ask for 'the old Lady who does the pearls.'"
Tessaril nodded. "Right, Thaerla."
"Uh, 'tis me, Narm, an—"
"Thaerla. Until your disguise is gone, 'Thaerla.' You don't answer to Narm, and if someone calls 'Narm' in the street, you don't answer or turn to look. Got that?"
"Y-yes, of course, Lady."
"Good. Now, there's one other thin—oh, Narm!n

"Yes?"
"Thaerla, you idiot wizard. You're a priestess from Eveningstar called Thaerla, and you've never heard the name 'Narm' before." Tessaril turned. "Olarla?"
"That would be me," Shandril said in amused tones. "Is it you, Lady Lord of Eveningstar? Here to see the Sword Coast lands, after all these years? Right here on . . ." she turned to survey the tall, dark standing stones all around them on the grassy hilltop and dropped her mocking tone to ask curiously, "What is this place, anyway?"
"Tsarn Tombs," Tessaril told her, "or Sarn Tombs, to some. An old burial place that serves as a landmark and sometimes a lookout when caravans come through with outriders to spare for the scramble up here."
"What trouble would they be looking out for?"
"Ores, brigands, and the occasional disguised spellnre-hurler," Tessaril replied with a teasing grin. "Now, stop worrying yourself and get going. I haven't got all day, you know."
"Yes, Vangerdahast said the king was on his way. You'll be needing your sleep," Narm said sarcastically
Tessaril gave him a look. "That was unworthy of a priestess of Chauntea—and overly daring for a young mage of no particular allegiance, too. Azoun is ... Azoun. I
love Filfaeril, and she loves me, no less because of what the king and I share. 'Tis not as if I'm the only one."
"Is he as good as they say?" Narm asked teasingly.
"Thaerla, enough," Tessaril growled, and then gave him a sudden, girlish grin and whispered, "Yes. Oh, yes, and better!"
Shandril was still gaping in astonishment at the Lady Lord of Eveningstar when Tessaril turned smoothly, swept the maid of Highmoon into her arms, hugged her fiercely, and said, "Go on to happiness, Shan, and the peace you seek. My thoughts walk with you."
"Lady Tess," Narm asked a little hesitantly as Shandril and

Tessaril rocked gently in each other's arms, "are these hills ... dangerous?"
"Most of the time, no, but 'tis best tb always beware brigands. You do have packs on your backs, and although folk of Chauntea rarely carry anything more interesting than a trowel and some seeds, brigands always want to look—just to be sure. We made you ugly enough that looking will suit them better than, ah, rummaging."
"Thanks," Narm said feelingly, as Tessaril embraced him. She was slim and curvaceous in her leathers and surprisingly strong. She gave him a fierce kiss and growled, "Yours is the harder road—mind you stick to it, right by your lady's side!"
The Lady Lord of Eveningstar whirled out of the young mage's arms and away to stand looking back at Narm and Shandril with the tip of her lifted sword glowing blue and the empty air before her growing a line of matching blue radiance.
"Fare you both well," she said, and before they could reply added briskly, "I go," and stepped forward. Her sword seemed to cut a gap in the air before her, a gash that leaked blue flame. She stepped through it and was gone, blue fire and mists vanishing in her wake.
Narm and Shandril looked at each other. . - -
"Well," the kitchenmaid from Highmoon said brightly, after a moment of silence, "It's just the two of us, again. Well met, Thaerla of Chauntea."
"Fair day and fair harvest, Olarla of Chauntea," Narm replied.
Shandril winced and shook her head. "You sound like Narm," she told him. "Like a male. Try to squeak a little more ... or growl and be surly."
After two attempts at squeaking that left Shandril doubled up in helpless laughter, Narm practiced growling and being surly as they peered around the hilltop.
Old, shattered tombs stood on all sides, overgrown by tall grasses. Here and there the grass had been trampled by feet that had been here before them, but there were no gnawed

bones or stink of death—and thankfully, no yawning graves or cracks opening into fell darkness. However, someone had painted "Beware: The Dead Walk" on one tall, leaning marker-stone. Thaerla and Olarla of Chauntea looked at that recent message, exchanged glances, and with one silent accord strode together down off the hilltop, following the brook Tessaril had suggested.

Shandril looked sidelong at Narm as they went, trying to see her husband in the fat, trudging priestess—his quick grin, the glossy wave of his shoulder-length dark brown hair, his slender good looks. No, there was none of that in these jowls and thick lips and amiable cheeks. She was looking at a kindly, fat, and already wheezing woman, stumbling along as—she looked down—she must be, herself. Well, they were two, and no doubt those who could see the glows of spells would know they were disguised—but they did not look like a graceful little imp of a scullery lass with a long, unruly mane of curling blonde hair, and her slim young mage of a mate.

"So Arauntar and Beldimarr in Orthil's guard are Harpers," Narm muttered, "and will be watching for us.

What about this Orthil himself? Did Tess say—?"

"She called him a good man," Shandril said thoughtfully. "She did not say he was a Harper or knew anything about us—or that he could be trusted with .. . our secret."

She glanced around and back behind them, knowing that Narm had already done so but wanting to be sure for herself. The little valley opened up before them, and it might have snakes or even something as large as a fox skulking in its grasses . . . but of ores or brigands or stalking dead tomb-things there was no sign.

The maid of Highmoon gazed at the hills ahead and the glorious deep blue sky above, flecked with just a few lazily drifting wisps of white cloud, and sighed.

"Tired of all this running?" Narm asked quietly. "Yes," Shandril told him quietly. "Very tired of it." She looked north

again, as far as she could see, to where distant mountain peaks rose—a few to seaward, just north of Water-deep, but most over to the north and east, in the northern backlands.
"You'd think, in all the wide Realms," she said wistfully, "there'd be a place for Narm and Shandril to dwell in happiness, free of the hundreds of evil, greedy folk who want the spellfire wench dead."
Narm nodded grimly and said nothing, but his hand went out to hers and squeezed it comfortingly. Shandril sighed again. "Zhentarim, a few Red Wizards of Thay, Dragon Cultists, the odd ambitious wizard, these shape shifters, too —is there no end to folk who want to snatch my spellfire, and me with it?" she asked bitterly.
"We could stay priestesses of Chauntea for the rest of our days," Narm said quietly. "I'd do that without a moment's regret, if you'd be happy. We could find a farm somewhere___"
"Yes, and die there the moment our disguises slipped or someone took a good look at us," Shandril said wearily. "No, I want to get to Silverymoon, hear whatever wise counsel High Lady Alustriel sees fit to impart to us ... and join the Harpers. Join because I've earned it, and they want me, and my—powers—can be of use to them. I can't hide from myself any better than I can hide from all the spellfire hunters."
She kicked at a stone, which rolled over obligingly to reveal nothing of interest, and added, "Fm in a cage, and my death — or the deaths of all who seek spellfire—are the only doors out."
Narm sighed. "Shan, don't talk like that," he pleaded. "I'll be here for you, I'll fix things somehow...."
Shandril's eyes were swimming as she looked back at him and shook her head, ever so slightly. "Don't think I don't love you or want you with me, Narm. You're all I have to cling to— but you're not Elminster or the Simbul or dread Larloch, and you never will be. It might take all of them together to smash down every last seeker-after-spellfire, even if such

folk could be known on sight and obligingly thrust forward to be seen and struck down. And what if Elminster or the Simbul or Larloch suddenly decides that they want spellfire?"
She drew in a deep breath and added in a small voice, "I'm not going to live very long, Narm, so if I want something, please give it to me or get for me. It may be the only chance 111 have to enjoy it, ever."
"Shan," Narm said roughly, taking her by the shoulders and swinging her around to face him, "please! Don't talk like that! Doom doesn't stand so close!"
"Oh?" Shandril asked him, in a voice that trembled on the edge of tears. "How so? Can you answer me this: Is there anywhere in all Faerun for someone who wields spellfire to hide?"

A LITTLE TROUBLE LATELY

If I had to list the dangers that have done the worst to humans of Faerun down the years—beyond their own pride, greed, and folly—I'd look first to the weather and the floods and famine it's caused, second to the hunger of hunting dragons and the swift breeding of bloodthirsty ores and goblins, and third to wizards. Or perhaps first to wizards. These days, certainly first to wizards. Pillage a dozen Realms with a spell, anyone?
Arathur 'Wise Eyes'
Sage of Athkatla
What One Man Has Seen
Year of the Lion

Years ago they'd discovered that this one small stretch of passage was safe. It ran between the archway whose pillars were carved into the likenesses of many writhing gargoyles and the little hall where four passages met, where it was rumored a
hidden portal opened betimes to admit something large, dark, many-clawed and lurking that liked to hunt mages.
Safe, that is, from sending echoes—even of whispered

converse—elsewhere.

It was always chill and dark, and as cold as stone everywhere that never sees sunlight, but those wizards who knew about it often tarried here to murmur words back and forth, like guilty young wastrelblades discussing secrets whose careless revelation would mean swift and harsh punishment. Their conversations were usually low-voiced, cryptic, and short—for even Zhentarim wizards have no love for slow deaths in torment.

Two wizards were standing in the safe stretch now, facing each other with their backs to the rough stone walls, where each could look down one direction of dark passage and see the slightest intrusion or approach when it was yet far away.

"If I have anything to say about such things," the taller wizard was saying sharply, "there'll be no more chasing about after useless, overly dangerous might-be's like this spellfire. We've strayed very far from being a fellowship founded on coins and power for all, with a hierarchy intended merely to keep peace amongst us and keep the ambitious from blasting the rest of us or betraying all our secrets in their eagerness to command all. Now we're venturing into an overboldness that's going to get us badly burned. Why make foes of Red Wizards, or even come to their notice at all, when there's no cause for it or gain in it? Why? Do our leaders now see themselves as Great Ruling Archwizards of the Realms or some other such fools' fantasy?"

"Don't let Manshoon or Fzoul or their like hear you speak like that, Korr," the shorter, stouter Zhentarim murmured, waving his hands toward the floor in a mute appeal for quieter speech. "We're very far from holding rank high enough to make such judgments or decide any policies."

"No," Korthauvar agreed, lowering his voice to an angry hiss, "we're of the great middling mass of competent wizards of the Keep—not overly ambitious magelings, but not masters who give orders, either That's precisely why the masters

should listen to us, HlaeL If we have such great misgivings, isn't it just possible that snatching at this spellfire is—ahem—wrong? A mistake that endangers us all, instead of dooming a handful of us sacrificed for the long chance at gaining it? Spend a few lives chasing spellfire, yes, but don't send us out in wave after wave to get slaughtered!"

"Well put, Korthauvar," a cold voice said out of the darkness above them. "Very well put. I shall remember your cogent arguments with the very precision you desire. No, tremble not—you're right. As much as some of us 'masters' may hate to admit it, your conclusions are unassailable."

Silence fell, leaving Korthauvar Hammantle and Hlael Toraunt staring at each other in terror in the dim cold, their hurried breaths curling away like smoke between them.

That silence stretched and grew long. When at last hope crawled back into their hearts and they began to straighten and breathe more calmly, the cold voice snapped suddenly, "Now the policy so cogently outlined by Korthauvar Hammantle sees its first application. Both of you—a handful of us, one might say— are now—right now—welcome in my chambers for a little task that needs doing: a little snatching after spellfire."

Mirt the Moneylender took the broad steps that curved up to the upper floors of his mansion two at a time, puffing like a brace of harnessed boars dragging a heavy wagon.

"Ha-ha!" he roared, in full gloat. "Has ever a man strutted and swaggered in Dock Ward with more just cause than I?"

He rubbed his hands together in glee as his old, flopping boots found the uppermost step, and took him briskly past the frankly buxom wench of glossy ivory and fully life-sized stature that crowned the stairpost. Beyond, on a tray of gleaming silver large enough for Dambrathan slavers to serve up bound slaves upon—for they'd done just that, ere a certain fat and fiercely mustached mercenary swordlord relieved them of it—stood a sparkling forest of finely etched and smooth-blown glass decanters.

Snatching up the tallest and unstoppering it for a healthy swig without wasting time on such fripperies as a goblet, the Old Wolf of Waterdeep hurtled onward, borne along on a hearty trail of chuckles.

"Asper, m'gel," he roared, "I'm a very prince among thieves—a deal-master among merchants! Old Thaglon surrendered all his fine steel-and-silver Amn-work for half what he should have asked—all because they're nigh-starving down there, and I threw in those two warehouses full of rotting nut-marrows I've been trying to get rid of. Ha-ha! Even if he delivers half the amount he promised, at a third the quality he claims, I'm ahead several wagonloads of coin! Come here and kiss this bottle with me!"

He roared with gusty laughter and swung around a cabinet carved into the fanciful likeness of a wyvern's head, its eyes being doors, each fashioned of a shield-sized slab of smooth-carved amber, into the sun-drenched open space at the center of the chamber where furs and cushions lay thick (with Asper betimes lounging upon them, though she wasn't lying there now). He kicked a cushion at the head of an obsidian unicorn statue with an accuracy and fervor that could not have failed to startle the beast had it been alive, and added in loud and leering tones, "Hah! Then ye can kiss me, by the back hind tooth of Larloch's pet dragon-devouring dragon! We're rich!" "You know, Old Wolf of mine, I believe I'd noticed that,"

a quietly musical and gently amused voice said from somewhere very near. "In fact, we've been rich for as long as I've been old enough to notice anything."

"Aye, but now we're richer—and 'tis so damned clever! Little love-lass, where are ye?" Mirt demanded in an amiable roar, stamping around the trophy-crowded room impatiently. Still rubbing his hands, he peered into the bedchamber, where the great canopied bed hung from the ceiling on thick gold-cord ropes overhung by the magnificent canopy Asper had made. Her wardrobe doors stood open, but so many clothes

were bulging forth that there was no way that even so slender an imp as his little lady could be hiding therein. The bed hung well clear of the floor, with only a huddled pair of his old boots beneath. The bed-sized bathing-pool in which she loved to soak was empty, though the scent of blossom water bespoke its recent use. Nay, she was not here!

"Where are ye, love?" he roared, whirling back to face the domed trophy chamber and spreading his arms wide. "Wher —"

The air shimmered in front of him, over the widest open expanse of furs and cushions, and that shimmer became an opening door of silver sparks and roiling blue flame. Silent flames traced a doorway that hung upright in midair.

Through it stepped a very long, shapely leg, followed by a tall, even more shapely body that sported a face even the most unattentive Waterdhavian knew. Emerald eyes framed by long, flowing silver hair, the limbs below half-seen through a gown of fine silk worn over thigh-high boots, the gown itself covered by a tight-waisted stomacher adorned with flowing, sapphire-studded elven traceries of silverstar-thread. The Lady Mage of Water-deep strode forward to face the gaping merchant, who stood silent, teetering with the half-empty decanter in his hand and his mouth hanging open where he'd broken off in mid-bellow.

"Old Wolf," Laeral said crisply, "we have to talk." There was the faintest of sounds—and cold steel pressed against the Lady Mage's throat from behind.

"After," Asper said softly into Laeral's ear, from just behind the knife, "y°u identify yourself. I suspect you're the Lady Mage of Waterdeep, but we've been having a little *
trouble lately with shapeshifters."

Mirt made a half-amazed, half-delighted rumble deep in his throat. Like a striking snake, his leather-clad lady had swung down from the plant-filled skylight in the ceiling and now hung upside down above the Lady Mage, dangling from one foot caught in one of the rope loops used by those watering

the plants.
Laeral calmly pushed the knife aside, turned around without stepping out of Asper's reach, and replied with a wry smile, "Most of the time I suspect I'm the Lady Mage of Waterdeep, too. Please accept my apologies for this overbold intrusion; 'tis not my habit nor to my liking, but—Asper, what shapeshifters?"
"Two I was forced to slay," Asper said, just as calmly, dropping barefoot and catlike to the floor with the knife still raised in her hand and ready to throw, "and one—"
"Who regrettably fell off yon balcony," Mirt rumbled with an airy wave of his hand, "when discussing the finer points of existence with me: my existence, to be more particular, and its chances of continuing."
"Malaugrym," Laeral muttered, "even here!" Mirt made a dramatic show of sighing. "Even in the best neighborhoods ..."
Laeral gave him a sigh of her own and snapped four words: "Asper. Mirt. Spellfire. Shandril."
"What?" Asper asked, stepping forward, Mirt only a pace behind. "What's happened to Shandril?"
"She's heading this way," Laeral said grimly. "With half the darker folk in the Realms right behind her, blades and spells out."
"Methought the lass was bound for Silverymoon and Alustriel," Mirt growled, rubbing his chin. "This city's a deadlier lair by far."
"Not so perilous as trying to cross the wilderlands to Silverymoon unseen," Laeral told him softly, plucking the decanter from his hands, "so my sister has agreed to come here, meet Shandril, and take her hence. Or wherever else she can best be safe." She raised the decanter, turned it, and eyed the liquid within, raising an inquiring eyebrow.
"Amberfire. Drink all you like, but be warned; he adds pepper to it," Asper said. "You need us to guard her." Her last sentence was a flat statement rather than a question.

Mirt lifted one bushy eyebrow. "Here in the 'Deep or out there in the wilds, a-finding her way hither?"
The Lady Mage drank deeply, shuddered, gave the decanter a disapproving look, and handed it back. "Both," she murmured, leaning forward. "If my Lord Khelben gets wind of this and goes rushing to her with risen magic raging around him, there can be no other outcome but spell-battle. Shandril will have no choice but to hurl spellfire or perish. In that sort . of storm, who knows what will happen to her spellfire?"
Asper stared at her. 'Tou mean it might go wild, and grow to something dragons and archwizards alike would flee from?"
Laeral nodded. "In that case we three—and Alustriel and all the other Harpers and Chosen we could muster—would be facing a new foe who might even overmatch our combined strength: Shandril Shessair."
"If you stand still, Torm, just once, I'll mark you, I will!" Panting, Sharantyr swung away from the leaping thief's
kick, flung her practice sword into the air before her, thrust her freed right hand to the ground in a spread-fingered claw, and on that pivot swept her body around. Her left hand caught her blade and stabbed it around ahead of her wheeling body, up and back. Torm was forced to fling himself over backward with an appreciative, "Woooa/i/" to avoid a broken nose. The blunt steel blade whistled past his throat as he went over, and the lithe ranger let her swing carry her up and around with it to land facing him in a ready crouch.
Torm's backflip carried him into a similar pose, facing her from seven feet or so away. They grinned at each other, panting and glistening with sweat, while Rathan deftly uricorked a bottle, held it up to catch the sparkling sunlight reflected from the breeze-stirred waters of the Tower Pool, and commented, "She almost had ye that time, Sir Clevertongue. Ye got her angry, and that's never a wise thing."

"Oh? See how beautiful she is when fury rides her?" Torm returned airily, grinning and gesturing with his own blade. "How unwise can it be, for me to gaze upon—hah!"

He met Sharantyr's rush with a leap to one side, a deft parry, and a shrewd, perfectly timed thrust that only just grazed the ranger's breast as she ducked away,

Sharantyr hissed something unladylike and gave ground, rubbing at where Torm's blade had struck home. Chuckling, the thief circled her, waving his own practice blade—unsharpened but as tempered and as heavy as his favorite long sword— tauntingly. "Who'll mark who, again, Lady Temper?"

With a tight smile she lunged, blade thrusting hard at his crotch. The moment his dancing parry struck her blade aside she leaped with it, coming around almost behind him and stabbing thrice. His blade caught the first two jabs—but the third reached just past him, and as Sharantyr sprawled into the grass, her blade was planted solidly amid the thief's ribs, hurling him over into a groaning fall beside her.

"Thy wine," Rathan told them both in an approving tone, "awaits—and I must say ye've earned it."

Gasping, the two slightly wounded, barefoot Knights rolled over to smile at each other. The dark, tight-fitting homespun tunics and breeches they both wore were plastered to them with sweat, and with one accord they rose, sprinted across the trodden grass—and hurled themselves into the pool on their backs, sending a sheet of water over the stout priest of Tymora.

Rathan roared out a startled oath and arched himself over the goblets of wine protectively. The water was just crashing down over him when the door of the little leaning stone tower that Elminster of Shadowdale was pleased to call home swung open.

The Old Mage was elsewhere, as usual, but his scribe Lhaeo came out blinking into the sunlight, pursued by a wonderful kitchen smell, and sighed at the sight of the drenched,

sputtering priest and the two hooting and chuckling heads bobbing in the pond beyond.
"My message," Lhaeo announced softly, arriving at the edge of the pool, "is for the Lady Sharantyr. Get me wet, and you don't eat."
There was a brief tumult in the water at his feet as Torm snatched Sharantyr's tunic up over her head—and then wrestled the lady ranger over backward, underwater.
Water roiled, a long leg kicked in the air, there was a brief but furious struggle beneath the waves ... and Sharantyr rose from the waters. She strode unconcernedly up the bank, stark naked. A wet bundle of muffled curses thrashed the waters in her wake. Torm's head and one of his arms were firmly tied up in the ranger's twisted, wet clothing, but his other arm was free and rapidly clawing the rest of him toward freedom.
Ignoring him? Sharantyr gave Lhaeo a gracious smile, and asked, "Yes?"
The scribe squinted up at that smile, sighed, and put something into her hand. Closing her fingers around it with his own, he said severely, "Don't drop that. Don't even look at it yet."
He dragged his robe over his head, revealing a hairy, amulet-behung chest and quite fetching silken undershorts, and said, "Here. Dry yourself. I'd tell you to wear it, but it won't come down much past your waist, and then—" he jerked his head back toward the snarling figure.lurching up out of the pond "—well have him to deal with again."
"Why, Lhaeo," Sharantyr said, looking down at him, "there's no need—"
"Oh, but there is. Get yourself dry. I bear an urgent spell-message from Tessaril Winter in Cormyr."
Wordlessly Rathan steered a goblet into Sharantyr's hand and turned to firmly lead the wetly cursing Torm a good distance away.
Sharantyr frowned, drained her goblet in one long toss, and

started toweling herself vigorously, darting an involuntary glance at her closed fist. "Tess? What—?"
Lhaeo smiled, took the empty goblet from her, and handed her Rathan's untouched one. "She says—" his voice changed, assuming perfect mimicry of the Lady Lord's light but commanding tones, and continued: "Shar, I need your help. The King has chosen this fair day to visit me. I can't slip away for more than a quick stroll to the garderobe or two, for he comes riding with more swaggering knights each time. To go missing would upset him, look ill in the eyes of those who ride with him, spread worry about my stewardship, and set the gossips to talking about a breach between us. So I'm stuck here—and Shandril and Narm have just set out through the Tombgate and in need of all the aid they can get. Saying the right word over this token will take only the person holding it to the far end of the Tombgate, the spot from which Narm and Shandril so recently set forth, wearing the spell-spun guises of two fat priestesses of Chauntea."
Shandril shook wet hair back over her shoulder, opened her fist, and looked down at what lay in her palm: a tiny piece of smooth ivory, carved into the likeness of a human skull.
She looked up from it with her eyes very large and dark, and asked softly, "And that 'right word' was ... ?"
The tapestries were already drawn across the windows, and a fire was crackling in the hearth. Highknight guards were well away, at the bottom of the stairs, and keeping everyone else even more distant, for the King of Cormyr was in private council with his Lady Lord of Eveningstar— and if he preferred to receive her reports while she lay unclad on her back upon the fur rugs covering the floor of her own bedchamber, that was his royal pleasure.
"Ah, Tess, Tess," the Dragon of Cormyr said fondly, leaning down to gently kiss—and then bite—the bared curves beneath him. "I've missed you, as always. How fares the little trouble with Manshoon and suchlike?"

"Unlike you, my Dragon," Tessaril gasped, writhing on the furs beneath him, "I believe that matter is now almost under control."

It befell so suddenly that Narm could scarcely believe it was happening. One moment they were walking along the banks of the boulder-studded brook, the bright sun shining hot upon their shoulders and the road not far away in front of them—and the next moment three figures rose in slow, menacing unison from behind one of the largest stones, swords and knives in their hands, and Faerun seemed suddenly dark and dangerous around them.

"Be still, Sisters of the Soil," one of them said grimly. "Don't move your hands at all—unless you want to lose them."

"Or you could scream and run," another said with a slow, unlovely smile. "I always like that."

"W-what?" Narm quavered, trying to sound like a middle-aged, fat, and thoroughly frightened woman—and succeeding far too well. One of the problems with acting scared was that you found, even after a few moments, that you really were.

"W-we have nothing," he added, letting his hand drift nearer to his belt-dagger—but steel flashed, his fingertips burned and then went cool... and when he moved his hand, it trailed blood from two of his fingers.

"Don't try that again," the third brigand said bluntly. "Just stand still, and we'll take what we want."

They stepped forward in unison, and Narm feigned mewing terror and trembled his way back from them.

"Don't trouble about your virtue," the second brigand said, the shortest one. "You're not exactly ... handsome, hey? Just stay still—we can rob your corpse with far less trouble than it takes to run after you, or listen to you screaming."

The tallest brigand was looming over Shandril. Narm cast a quick glance at nim and saw that a sword had long ago left a long, disfiguring white scar across the man's face. From brow to cheek it ran and had turned the eye it crossed much

larger and darker than the man's other eye—which was cold, steady, and a deep brown in hue.
Shandril went to her knees—in reverence, it seemed, rather than fear, and stared up into those mismatched eyes with an expression of awe on her fat and weathered face. "The man with different eyes!" she gasped. "At last!" The brigands frowned at her in unison. "What foolery's this?" the second one snapped.
"You are the one foretold," Shandril said, in a voice that trembled with excitement. "I must aid you in any way I can!" She fumbled with the thin purse at her belt, got it undone, and thrust it up at him. "Take all I have, Exalted One!" she pleaded, reaching up for him with trembling fingers—as Narm hastily went to his knees beside her. "Take me!"
"Exalted One, eh?" the brigand growled slowly, and then his teeth flashed in a wondering grin. "Well, then."
He pointed at Shandril's bodice, and the fat priestess hastily started to tear it open, tugging at its laces. The brigand went to his own knees, reaching for her.
Narm hesitantly reached out for the man, too—only to earn the curt command, "See to my fellows. Surrender yourself to them!"
Grinning, the other two brigands loomed over Narm. "Turn around, you ugly sow," the third one said. "On your x
knees, mind! I don't want to have t—"
Shandril judged them close enough. At last- She smiled up into the face of the brigand with the mismatched eyes—and blasted him to scorched, tumbling bones.
The other two brigands barely had time to snarl out startled oaths before they lacked heads to say anything with at all. Smoking, the headless corpses reeled back and toppled away from Narm.
"Shan," the young wizard murmured urgently, as he shrank away from loosely bouncing brigand boot heels. "Your seeming ... 'tis gone. I can see ... the real you."
"I know," Shandril sighed, "but it couldn't be helped. These

damned robes'll fall right off me now, too."
Narm frowned. "The ferry's only a hill or so away, and Tess—Lord Tessaril warned us how lawless Scornubel was."
"I'm not walking in there barefoot and naked," Shandril told him, "and priestesses of Chauntea don't keep slaves."
Narm frowned again, trying to hunt down memories.
Shandril watched them pass like shadows across his face and kept silent.
"But," her husband said slowly, remembering, "they do penances. I've seen them and asked why. For acts of waste and carelessness, like campfxres that they let get out of control to scorch plants and trees and all."
"Meaning?"
"Your spare tunic—you can see through it if it's pulled over your head, yes?"
"So I go hooded, forbidden to speak, and you carry a switch to strike me if I do," Shandril said slowly. "I saw a priest of the Mother punished like that, once. His hands were tied to his body, the rope crossed around and around him, with flowers and seed-heads stuck through it." She nodded then grinned suddenly. "Well, I wanted adventure. Let's get behind yon rocks, out of sight of the road, and do it. Collect their knives and purses—oh, and their belts. These damned boots won't stay up now that my legs are their proper size again. I'll start picking wildflowers."
Narm rolled his eyes. "Don't you trust my taste in colors?" he replied mockingly.
"You," Shandril told him severely, holding together the remnants of her homespun Chauntean robe as it fell off her shoulders once more, "spent far too much time in the company of one Torm. A clever tongue is not the prize feature you seem to think it is."
Narm grinned, opened his mouth to replay—then flushed at whatever thought had leaped into his mind.
Closing his mouth again hastily, he turned to the bodies of the brigands, where flies were already buzzing.

"That's better," Shandril told him, trudging for cover in boots that were already wadding shapelessly down around her ankles. "That's much better."

THE SUN OVER SCORNUBEL

Lawless places all have a particular smell. 'Tis the mingled scents of blood and everything else that can be made to flow, spew, or spill out of a man, plus the stench of rotting corpses and long-moldering bones—and the stink of fear.

Unpleasant, but familiar soon enough, and I've come to appreciate the honesty of this "lawless smell." After all, 'tis no more nor less than the aroma of life.

Rathrol of Scornubel
Merchant Lord of Sebben
Wheels That Groan, Purses of Gold
Year of the Weeping Moon

"Pinch my nose," Shandril hissed. "Pinch it, or I'll sneeze!"

Thaerla of Chauntea promptly reached stubby fingers to the hooded face thrust toward her, found Shan's nose through the fabric, and covered the sneeze that promptly followed anyway with the severe comment, "You know the rule, sister." A solid application of the switch across the shoulders of the Sister of the Soil followed.

Thaerla found the tall, greasy-haired ferryman grinning at them and gave him a cold stare. "Seek not to misunderstand this sacred matter," she told him ponderously, and resumed her stare across the dirty waters of the Chionthar at the ramshackle buildings of Scornubel.

"Of course," the ferryman said in tones of mock humility, and spat into the river.

As if this had been a signal, his rowers leaned into their oars, and amid many creakings and thunkings the boat swiftly closed the distance to the docks.

With a regal nod to the ferryman—who grinned again—Thaerla stepped up the worn stone steps, tugging on the length of cord that kept her hooded companion stumbling along at her heels.

Shandril almost fell twice on the stairs, and Narm hauled her up the last few by the harness of ropes he'd tied around her. Glancing back and seeing the ferryman's eyes still upon them, Narm led his captive a good four paces away from the docks, stopped with hands on hips to glare around at the colorful sights and generally disagreeable sounds of nigh-lawless Scornubel, and sniffed.

"This is a most unholy place," Thaerla of Chauntea intoned. "Unwelcoming to Chauntea."

Shandril rolled her eyes, strode past the fat priestess of Chauntea, and gave "her" a most unladylike tug at the ample hill of flesh where the homespun robe curled around one hip. "Come on," Shan ordered, from beneath her hood. "We'll have plenty of opportunities to be unwelcome just a few paces from here. In among all the buildings, where I don't feel quite so watched."

Tessaril stretched, sighed—gods, what a magnificent man, even after all these years!—and tied the sash at her waist with a flourish. If she knew Azoun, his "just going down to fetch a map and a bottle" would bring him back with a Highknight or two in tow, and food. He always seemed to work up a hunger in this room, somehow....

She smiled wryly at that and kicked one of her boots out of sight, under the bed. The Beldragon lamp would cast the best light onto any map unfurled on the big table. She fetched it, reached a wooden skewer into the fire to light it with, positioned the lit lamp just so, and scooped up four Purple Dragon badges from her writing table to serve as map-corner weights.

The garderobe door opened just as she was setting them down, and Azoun stepped out—in a grand court tunic and breeches, no less. He was alone and emptyhanded, and when he looked at her, there seemed to be a question or an uneasiness brewing in his eyes.

She knew her own eyes had widened, and she hastened to soften whatever impression the startled—rather than

welcoming—expression on her face must have made by saying eagerly, "Back so soon for more, my lord? I'm surprised you can still get through that little window!"
"I'm worried," Azoun said in a strange voice, "about this Shandril. She's a danger to all of us—not so much her, but all the folk seeking her, who bring their swords and spells to menace fair Cormyr, striking out whenever any of our folk or laws or walls stand in their paths. Where have you hidden her?"
His voice almost sounded like someone else....
Tessaril's eyes narrowed, and she took a swift step back. "Azoun?"
His hands reached for her with dizzying speed—on arms that lengthened into ropy, snakelike tentacles!
They swooped after her as she ducked away, around behind the table. One tentacle shot under it, thrusting at Tessaril, but she'd gained the handful of moments she needed. Hissing forth a spell, she vaulted up onto the table, rolled across it kicking at an eeHike arm that came snatching after her, found the floor on the far side—and the wand hanging in its sheath where she'd left it.
Behind her, her spell flung a vicious ring of lightnings around her foe, and left the thing that was not Azoun snarling and writhing in the heart of a crackling ring of restlessly leaping bolts.
By then she had hold of the wand—for a moment or two, ere the last ragged force of Tessaril's own spell was flung back at her.
Faerun flashed blindingly around the Lady Lord of Eveningstar, and it felt like she'd been slapped across the face with the flat of a swordblade.
There was a deafening crashing sound in her ears as the magic broke over her, then the fainter, deeper crash of her shoulders smashing into her bookshelf and rocking it back against the wall. A cluster of tallglasses shattered somewhere above her and rained down their shards in front

of her as she rebounded, breathless and staggering, and saw her wand spinning away from her numbed fingers . . . even as a small forest of tentacles stabbed at her ...

There were times in Tessaril Winter's life when the gods were pleased to slow things to a crawl, so she could enjoy— or endure—them to the utmost. So it was that after the breathless whirling moments of being hurled back by her own magic, striking her shelves with force enough to break one shoulder—she could feel the sickening searing of bone grinding against bone, now—things became very quiet for a time, and very slow.

The shapeshifter was a thing of horror now, Azoun's features halt-melted into gray-brown, mottled shapelessness, the semblance of magnificent royal boots incongruously retained beneath a thicket of writhing, reaching tentacles—and now, off" to her right, the real Azoun was coming back up the stairs with a large, loosely rolled map of the Stonelands in one hand and two wine bottles clutched between the long, strong fingers of the other. There was a Highknight following behind him, carrying a domed platter from which steam streamed in enthusiastic plumes—bringing a strong scent of roast bustard with it.

"By Boldovar's bloody beard!" the King snarled. Things began to move swiftly again before Tessaril's eyes. Very swiftly. Bottles and platter thumped to the furs, swords flashed out, and men leaped forward through a fresh, whirling forest of tentacles. Tessaril ran after her wand—straight at the shapeshifting monster—and she had a glimpse of Azoun snarling and batting away swarming tentacles.

The Highknight plunged in front of his King, hacking with his blade like a madman, and the tentacles closed over him in an eager, writhing storm. Tess struggled against a thickening tangle of tentacles, trying desperately to snatch up the wand before the shapeshifter did.

The Highknight gave a desperate, gurgling cry, somewhere

under the surging, shifting flesh that enveloped him—and a horrible wet splintering of bone followed.

Tessaril knew what that sound meant and felt no surprise at all when the man's head thumped to furs right beside her straining hand, bounced up into several questing tentacles, then thumped again to the floor and rolled away somewhere unseen, leaving a glistening trail of blood across the Lady Lord's fingers.

With a wordless roar of anger Azoun sprang into the air to reach over flailing tentacles and run his blade right through the head of his false double.

Blood spurted, the shapeshifter squalled, and tentacles whipped about in a frenzy, shattering the lamp, hurling Tessaril across the floor in a helpless tumble, and driving Azoun back along the stairhead rail in a confusion of curses and creaking wood.

The wand! Tessaril struggled to claw herself to a stop and get free of the encumbrances of her gown and her own hair, to see where the wand of lightnings now lay ere the shape-shifter did.

There was a slithering sound, the garderobe door banged open amid more slitherings, and the room was suddenly empty of tentacles.

Empty of ... battle. Azoun was panting against the rail with his sword in hand and his fine tunic torn half off his body. Her wand lay alone and forlorn on the tangled furs, a headless Highknight was sprawled across the head of the stairs, his sword not far from his hand, and over in a corner the man's staring head lay amid the shards of her lamp. No flames, thank the gods.

She looked wildly around the room, past the wreckage of the big table. No flames anywhere—and not three paces away, the covered platter still steamed merrily.

With a groan, Tessaril struggled to her feet, shrugged her robe back onto her shoulders—gods, the pain!—and darted barefoot for her wand. Snatching it up, she raced to the

garderobe.
It was empty, the window hanging down crazily from its frame.
"Tess," the King growled, "come away from there. I'll not have you killed chasing after some beast! Whence came it? Have you seen it before?"
Tessaril ran to Azoun and hugged him fiercely. His arm tightened around her shoulder, and she couldn't help but scream.
There was a frantic thudding of boots and the clang and tjqutjtii ui armor striKing against walls and railings, as Highknights came pounding up the stairs with blades drawn.
"Shapeshifter!" Azoun snapped, ere the questions could begin. "It went out the window—and, mind: It already knows how to take my shape quite well!"
Highknights plunged into the tiny privy-room. Wood splintered as someone burst right out the window frame without slowing, there was a curse and a scraping of boots on stone and roof tiles, and man after man followed after.
Two Highknights lingered, swords out and eyes hard as they looked at Tessaril and around at the ruins of her room. "We're fine," Azoun told them curtly, and jerked his head toward the stairs in an unmistakable order. Reluctantly— and not before giving the Lady Lord parting looks of cold promise— the knights went downstairs.
Azoun sighed and stepped away from Tessaril. "I didn't want to even ask this," he said to the stair rail, "but you did shelter Shandril Shessair in the Hidden House. Is she there yet? Where have you hidden her?" At his last words, the King brought his head up and looked at her sharply.
Tessaril gave him a crooked smile, and said softly, "She's half Faerun away from here by now, my Dragon—and that's all I'll say."
Azoun looked into her eyes for a long moment, expression grim—and then bowed. "I'm sorry, Tess. I trust you . . . but the next time Manshoon of the Zhentarim comes skulking

nigh Eveningstar, call on me, won't you? I don't want to lose the best Lord I have!"
"Azoun," Tessaril murmured, "hold me. Please. Just hold me."
"Of course," the King of Cormyr said quietly, and put his arms around her with the greatest of care.
"Gods, but I'm hungry," Shandril murmured into Narm's ear as another wagon rumbled deafeningly past, sending the dust swirling up around them. "Grubby, too. Ah, for a bath!"
"The river's just back there," Narm suggested slyly.
Shandril pinched him. "Did you see how many dead fish were floating around those docks? No, thank you!"
"Well, how about yon bright establishment?" Narm waved across the crowded street. More mules than people inhabited Scornubel, it seemed, and thanks to the dung no one cleared away, buzzing flies outnumbered both together. They looked at the bright signboard of a shopfront that seemed grander than most.
"The Sun Over Scornubel," Shandril murmured, squinting through her hood to read the name on the sign aloud. "A club, do you think? Or a proper inn?"
"Well, there's washing hanging, out behind—bedlinens," Narm replied. "I saw it a few paces back . . . and smell the food?"
"Well, then, why are you holding me back?"
"Do priestesses of Chauntea use inns or just sleep in the fields? And—your penance?"
"Sisters of the Soil certainly slept under Gorstag's roof, back in Highmoon," Shandril said. "Often." She took a step toward the signboard, pulling her rope harness tight in Narm's grasp. "Come on. I'm hungry."
"And if I refuse?"
"I," Shandril reminded him, with a wry grin that he could hear in her voice, "have the spellfire, remember? I'm not to be argued with."
"Yes," Narm agreed quietly, holding firmly to the ropes that

bound her arms to her sides but letting her walk forward,
tuwaru me oun, out does tne rest 01 the Kealms know that? And how urgently do you want them to?"
"No, Torm, I'm going alone," Sharantyr said firmly, for perhaps the eighteenth time. "Much as I enjoy your lame jokes and prancing pranks, there are times when stealth is necessary, and a little quiet so one can think, and even something called 'prudence,' which I believe would require Elminster and about a year of his unbroken time to make you fully and truly understand. So bide you here with Rathan, drinking far too much and annoying the good folk of Shadowdale, and let me see to this in my own way."
Wordlessly the thief held out the next piece of her leather war-harness, to help her put it on. He was holding the breastplates, of course.
Sharantyr stepped forward until she filled them, lifted her arms so he could bring the buckles around, endured his novel way of doing so in good-natured silence, and as he casually brought one of his knives up to her throat intercepted his wrist in a grip of iron and said, "No, Torm. As much as you find it hard to believe that any female could refuse you in anything, I'm going to do just that. Threaten and coerce all you like: You stay here. Now I'd like to be on my way. I'm almost dressed despite your kind help, the sun waits for no laggard, and if you delay my leaving I'm going to toss you in the nearest horse trough and hold you there while Shaerl douses you with all the vile perfumes her older Rowanmantle kin insist on sending her from the highhouse fashion lounges of Suzail—and believe me, you wouldn't like that."
"Ah," Torm said impishly, "but just how far d'you think you're going to get without this?" He opened his hand, and the ranger saw the little ivory skull gleaming in it.
Sharantyr sighed, made a grab for it that He easily ienueu off—and as he twisted away, chuckling, brought her booted left foot up hard into his crotch with all the force she could

put behind it.
His codpiece was armored and would leave a bruise on her shin that might take a month to stop aching, but the thief of the Knights was smaller and lighter than the lady ranger, and her kick launched him into the air with a startled whistle of pain and escaping breath that took him into senselessness with nary another sound—save for the meaty thud of his body falling with full, limp force into the waiting arms of Rathan Thentraver, Stalwart of Tymora. The priest winced, cradled Torm as gently as one might hold a babe, and lowered him deftly to the floor.
"Had he not been armored, lass," he said gravely, "that would have been far less than kind. As 'tis—well, one can't deny he hath reaped a harvest his own hand hath most enthusiastically sown. The cup will have cut his thighs. He'll be stiff and sore for some days, and then-1—I fear, as should we all—himself again." He tossed her something small and smooth: the ivory skull.
Sharantyr caught it and told Rathan, "I wish, just for once, he'd let someone else's will prevail. When he awakens, tell him I'm sorry for doing this ... but this matters much to me: not just the doing of it, but undertaking it by myself. The days and months and years pass, and I wither in his shadow."
The priest nodded. "I understand just what you mean," he said, "and will tell him. Tymora and all the other benevolent gods watch over thee, Sharantyr—and come back safe to us."
The lady ranger put the skull into her belt pouch, adjusted the slender long sword that rode on her hip, and looked up at him with a sigh, then a rueful grin.
"Well," she replied, "I suppose there's always a first time."
"Better?" Narm asked, as he tightened the ropes around her arms again.
"Much," Shandril said, and kissed his cheek as he bent past her. Narm gave her a grin—it made Thaerla of Chauntea's

face wrinkle up like a benevolent toad—and said, "I'm not sure how you're going to like sitting there watching me eat and drink when you can't have anything."
Shandril stiffened. "I'd forgotten that," she said slowly. "Narm, I've got to eat. I—won't they bring food up to us, here?"
"I'll go see."
"No, we'll go see. I'm not parting from you, not even for a moment. This is Scornubel—anything can happen."
Thaerla of Chauntea's smile was decidely wry this time. "Try that last sentence of yours again, and put the word 'Highmoon' in place of 'Scornubel.' Then try it with 'Shadowdale.' 'Waterdeep' has a nice ring to it, too."
"Hush! That's not funny!" The penitent priestess wriggled her arms, testing the ropes around her and added in a smaller voice, "True, though. I'm not happy to say it, but... 'tis true." The Sun was a good inn and a popular one. In Scornubel, that meant it was something of a fortress, uneasily cloaked in small touches of luxury. Room doors in the Sun came with their own lock-props, to be set by patrons on the inside when being intruded upon was not highly desirable. Narm shot the bolt, lifted the prop aside, and indicated the door with a flourish. "Penitents first?"
Cautiously Shandril pulled on the door-ring, and even more cautiously peered out. The^passage beyond was empty. It ended in a short flight of steps leading down onto a landing that overlooked the forehall of the inn—a landing that sported a lounge Seat for the use of patrons, and two smaller, harder seats flanking the passage. On one sat a uniformed
servant, and the other was occupied by a nara-iacea, upmii? armed guard. Thaerla of Chauntea exchanged a few polite words with the servant and towed her silent penitent back to their room.
"That was simple enough," Narm said, going straight to the window to test its frame of iron bars—old and rusty, but

solid. "I'd rather stay right here until late morning on the morrow, and go seeking the Tankard and our caravan-master then."

A short, choked-off scream came in the window, and he gestured ruefully in its direction. "The local sights seem—well, a trifle too exciting."

"I hate this place," Shandril said softly. "A whole city full of folk being brutal to each other, cheating and threatening and coercing ..."

Narm shrugged. "So we get away from here as soon as Orthil Voldovan will take us—and go straight to Water-deep, another den of harmony, fresh air, and public safety."

"Stop it," his lady whispered fiercely. "I'm serious, Narm. What if someone drugs or poisons our food? 'Twouldn't surprise me!"

Thaerla of Chauntea raised one chubby but triumphant finger. "Ah, there I can be of some service. Jhessail taught me a very rare spell that reveals taints and poisons to a mage—as purple glows."

"And if you cast it, there goes your disguise, just as my spellfire shattered mine," Shandril muttered into his ear. "Leaving us for all the world to see in the heart of this—this city of thieves, slavers, and brigands!"

Narm sighed. "So what would you have me do? Let you faint of hunger?"

"Narm," Shandril said in a low whisper, "I don't know. I haven't known 'the wise thing to do' since I first left Highmoon ... ana i don't seem to be getting any better at it. I—"

There was a sharp rapping at the door. Narm clapped a hand over Shandril's mouth for a moment and slid aside the little window shutter, asking in Thaerla of Chauntea's sniffiest voice, "Yes? You disturb us at prayer for a good reason?"

"You ordered evenfeast for two," a flat, unimpressed voice replied, "and I've brought it. Still interested?"

"Ah, now. That's different," Thaerla replied, unbolting the door again.

A hard-eyed guard entered, a loaded hand crossbow aimed at the ceiling and his other hand hovering above the hilt of his blade. Behind him came two chambermen in the maroon-and-gold uniform of the inn, bearing steaming dome-covered platters on their shoulders, followed by another guard. The foremost guard pulled on a carved knob on the wall beside the door that Narm had thought was mere decorative molding atop a pillar—and the whole affair came out of the wall as a table on edge. Expertly he kicked it up and open, and stood back to let the servants set down their platters.

As they did so, the other guard came into the room, drew the door closed, and leveled another hand crossbow at Shandril—as the first guard brought his crossbow down to menace Narm, and the two chambermen lifted the domes away from their platters to reveal small plates of roast boar on skewers—and cocked hand crossbows of their own. With swift deftness they removed wooden safety catches, laid darts into tracks, ready to fire, and pointed their weapons at the two priestesses.

"W-what is the meaning of this?" Thaerla of Chauntea quavered in outrage.

"It means," the first guafrd said pleasantly, "you're both going to get down on your faces on the floor in front of us, with no hurlings of spellfire or anything else—or well see if someone can wield spellfire with two crossbow darts in her throat. Or eyes, perhaps,"

"Down!" one of the chambermen snarled, gesturing with his crossbow. "On the floor now!"

"Which one of them is the spellfire wench, do you think?" the other guard muttered. "We could kill the other one and—"

Slowly the hooded, penitent priestess wavered uncertainly to her knees, and then down. After a swift glance at her,

Thaerla followed, murmuring, "Chaunteadeliver-usChaunteasaveusChaunteakeepandpreserveusyourfaith-ful servants—"

"Silence! She's a god, so she's heard you. Now, enough!" the second guard snarled, stepping forward to aim his crossbow at Shandril's hooded head from only a few feet away. One of the chambermen did the same. The other two thrust their bows almost into Thaerla's face, and the priestess ended her supplication with a sort of peeping sound and sank floorward.

The spellfire came without warning, roaring forth with enough fury to snatch all four men off their feet and drive them, shattered to pulp, into the wall behind them—in the scant instants before that wall disappeared, and startled faces gaped at Shandril from the room beyond.

The owners of those faces promptly screamed, clawed aside their prop and bolts, and fled. Shandril rose with her face white and set but her eyes dark and terrible with rage.

From the window came a burst of fire and flame that flung iron bars like kindling into the room, to crash and bounce and roll. Shandril caught a glimpse of two faces outside, glaring in at her with expressions that were less than friendly—and as they aimed wands in through the roiling smoke and crumbling hole that had been the window, she gave them spellfire, blasting much of that wall away.

uS-shan, easy" Narm hissed, still on his knees. "This building might come down on us if y—"

"So get us out of here," she said in a voice that trembled with rage. "Right now I just want to lash out at anyone in this Nine Hells of a city!"

Narm snatched up their packs and snatched the door open—to stare into the hard-eyed faces of a dozen or more warriors. He barely slammed it again before a crossbow cracked. The quarrel slammed through the closing gap and shivered its way across the room, and Narm was hurled back, the door banging open, under the fury of hard-charging warriors.

Shandril Shessair was waiting for them, spellfire leaking from her eyes and nose as she glared. "Leave me alone!" she howled, slaying them with roaring gouts of flame that seared the passage outside and left small fires raging in its wake. "Just—"

There were angry shouts from the inn stairs, and the thunder of running feet. Figures moved in the next room whose wall Shandril had breached, dark-robed figures who'd obviously come in through its window, and were now waving spells as fast as their fingers could fly.

Shandril hurled spellfire at them—but her searing flames clawed along something that wrestled with it and withstood it, something that looked like black fire. Open-mouthed, Narm watched jet-black flames rage and snarl in the face of white-hot spellfire. Then a wizard moaned, reeled, and collapsed—as if exhausted or drained, not struck by anything Shandril had sent—and the black flames sank back^

"Shan!" Narm cried, "we have to get out of here! The wall behind us—blast it!"

His raging wife turned with her hair swirling around her like so many eager, licking flames, and the wall obligingly

darkened, melted away, and was gone—but her flames were faltering, now,' and in the darkened room beyond were more hard-faced warriors in dark battle armor, with drawn swords and glaives in their hands.

A cascade of lightnings crashed down around them, and Shandril drank them in eagerly, turning with renewed vigor to face the wizards, trying to draw them into hurling more spells—ere she fed a slaying sheet of spellfire at head-level out into the passage and spun around to give the same to the warriors now surging forward to try to clamber through the hole she'd burned into their room.

The boar-like stench of cooked man-flesh was rising around them now, and Narm was crouching at Shandril's feet with their packs in his hands, trying not to hamper her as she

turned and spat fire again and again—brief, careful gouts now, trying to preserve what she had left. The passage was afire; there was no going out that way—and the longer she was forced to fight, the less likely stepping into either of the other rooms, wizards and fresh hostile warriors or none, would give them any easy route to escape. That left—

"The window!" Narm snapped. "Someone's climbing in the window!"

Shandril wheeled around, smoking hands raised to slay once more—only to stop, her eyes caught by a gleaming silver harp badge.

The man holding it was a smiling, dark-haired figure in leathers, wearing a sly expression on his handsome face that reminded her of Torm of the Knights of Myth Drannor. He gave them an airy wave, and called, "These accommodations seem a little—crowded. I generally provide free guidance to visitors to this fair city. Is there anywhere else you'd prefer to be, about now?"

"I can think of several," Shandril replied, hurling a tongue of spellfire at a wizard in the next room who'd fumbled out a dagger and was raising it to throw, "but none of them are in Scornubel. Do you—harp alone?"

"Most of the time," the black-haired man replied, giving the two priestesses of Chauntea a crooked smile. "I am Marlel, and I believe I already know both of your names—your real names. I can take you to—'ware behind you, in the passage!" Shandril whirled, blasted, and watched the body of a warrior who'd been carrying a full-sized crossbow along the burning hallway toward them dance headless back into the flames, to fall and be lost, his bow firing harmlessly down the passage. There was a thud and a groan in the distance—hmm, not so harmlessly, after all.

"My thanks," Shandril told the Harper crisply. "Now, can you take us to, say, The Stormy Tankard, on Hethbridle Street?"

"Of course," Marlel told them with a smile. "If you can hold

onto a rope, the window awaits."
Shandril gave Narm a shove in the Harper's direction, and after two quick glances into the room of the warriors—where no one moved—and the passage—burning too merrily, now, to fear any arrivals that way—turned to face the wizards once more. One of them was just finishing a spell of hurled fists. Shandril gave him a cold smile and awaited it, spellfire racing up and down her widespread arms—and the wizard promptly fled.
Marlel leaned out the window almost lazily, flung a knife, and there was a short, strangled gurgling sound, followed by the heavy thud of a body ending its fall.
Shandril's body jerked under the first few blows of the mage's spell, and then her spellfire rose bright around her and she sighed almost in rapture as she drank in the magic.
The small fires on her body died away, and she smiled and strode to Marlel, who gave her his crooked smile, indicating the window with a flourish.
"Just a moment," Narm said, and cast his poison-detecting spell on the platters that still steamed on the table mode the shattered door.
The roast boar brought for them promptly glowed bright purple.

OTHER LIVES, OTHER DREAMS

An inn is like a very small and poorly lit realm: It holds arrogant nobles, those who think they rule or believe they're important, the downtrodden who do the real work, and the outlaws and dark-knives whose work is preying on others. The problem is the constant stream of arrivals and departures that robs ye of the time ye need to learn which guest belongs to which group. So ye end up having to be constantly wary of them all. Just as in larger realms.
Blorgar Hanthaver of Myratma
Doors Open To All: Forty Winters An Innkeeper
Year of the Striking Falcon

If The Sun Over Scornubel laid claim to the mantle of "a superior inn of service and distinction," The Stormy Tankard made no such pretensions. It was the sort of place where no one had ever cleaned anything since it was built, and rooms were small, dark bunk-holes boasting furnishings that were sparse, mismatched, and either battered or outright broken. This squalor was enlivened by the sounds of unclasped and uncloaked revelry from adjacent chambers—all such rental-quarters being situated up narrow, creaking stairs above a smoke-filled, ever-noisy den of drink and brawling and harsh-voiced chatter. There was nothing unpopular about the Tankard's taproom—it was crowded with folk of half a dozen races, who by their looks and garb hailed from a score of lands or more.

Night was falling over Scornubel like a dark cloak spread across a red, starlit sky as Marlel led Narm and Shandril—still in their robes, but fat she-priestesses no longer—in through a side door of the Tankard.

"Wait your turn," a cold voice greeted them sourly, out of the darkness.

"Aye," another voice agreed. "Just stand still and keep shut an' wait."

"Fair evening to you, Tulasker," Marlel said merrily. "As it happens, we're not in the market just now—make way, please, so I can get to Pharaulee and book a room."

"Ho, ho, the Dark Blade of Doom has chosen already, has he?" Shrewd eyes peered at Shandril and Narm in the gloom, and Tulasker added with an unlovely laugh, "Strange tastes for you, Marlel!"

"Not half so strange as what you'll be tasting if you don't roll aside, old blade," Marlel replied lightly.

"Ho ho! And what if I don't?"

"Then, Tulasker, I'm afraid you'll learn firsthand how I came by my rather grand professional title. It will be one of those sharp, painful, and rather final lessons, too."

"Aye, aye, impress us all," Tulasker muttered disparagingly,

as he slowly shuffled aside.
At the far end of the gloomy room, a sharp-featured woman wearing rather too much face paint and rather too
little of anything else ducked out from behind a curtain and snapped, "Next!"
"Fraea," the cold-voiced man said quickly.
"Four gold," the woman said promptly, holding out her hand.
"Four?"
"Dispute with me, Nalvor, and it'll be five," was the swift reply. "Four, or be off with you!"
Marlel led his two priestess-robed companions in the other direction, down a dark and narrow passage, to a doorway where a tall, bald mountain of flesh with tusks and large ears —a half-ore, whose face and chest were covered with old, wandering sword scars—stood with arms folded and a spike-handled axe gripped in each heavy hand, blocking the way. . .
"Business with Rildra," the Harper told him.
The guard's eyes narrowed. "You, Marlel?"
"Strange times, Ulburt, and strange doings. Look upon it as free entertainment, sent by the gods especially to you."
"I look upon it as trouble," the half-ore told him bluntly, "especially when you're involved. What business with Rildra?"
"A chance to flip her a coin and so get to talk to Pharaulee."
"That you can do directly," the guard told him, waving them past. "Rildra met with a little accident earlier today." "Her last?"
"Unless she knows some way to come back to life after hanging for half a day with two glaives run right through her. But she took a Red Wizard down to the worms first, and one of his bodyblades, too—I guess they're not used to roughing up women who aren't slaves and don't carry hairpins. Right through the eyes, she skewered them."
Ulburt's voice was full of grudging pride. Against Narm's shoulder, Shandril convulsed in a silent, sudden shiver.

Marlel turned to his two companions. "Wait here. Ulburt will look after you, or I'll come back, cut off his down-belows, and feed them to him as Ms next meal."

Without waiting for a reply, the Dark Blade of Doom ducked past the half-ore's deep, annoyed rumble, through the doorway.

He returned quickly, standing aside with a flourish in Narm and Shandril's direction. They were momentarily aware of a pair of old and very sad eyes regarding them out of a large and gray-haired but lushly beautiful face, ere that face nodded and withdrew behind the half-ore once more.

"Pharaulee just wanted to see you," Marlel explained. "All settled. You have the—well, I'll show you."

Running a hand over the apparently solid wall next to Narm, the Harper found something with his probing fingers. There was a click, and a section of the weathered paneling shrank back into the wall. Marlel gave it a push, and it receded reluctantly.

"Hurh!" Ulburt growled. "You're not supposed to know about that!"

"Well, you shouldn't be so careless, Ulburt," the Harper replied serenely. "You're the one who showed me this back stair, last month—taking a body through it after you had a little accident with your axe, as I recall." Giving the section of moving wall a last shove, he grabbed Narm's forearm and tugged him into the gloom.

"I never! I—"

"Come" Marlel murmured to Shandril with some urgency, "let's get up above before anyone decides we're interesting enough to follow."

Shandril rolled her eyes. "Oh, half Faerun already seems to have taken that view," she murmured. "You lead the way."

Marlel grinned. "You've done this before, haven't you?"

"I hesitate to agree until I know just what you mean by 'this,'" Shandril replied evenly, waving at him to precede

her. "Increasingly, I find, I dislike disagreements—they tend to be so final."
"No doubt," Marlel said thoughtfully, giving her a look that was devoid of his usual smile for once. "No doubt."
He went up the narrow, foul-smelling stair in the darkness, Shandril followed warily and close behind him, and Narm watched the half-ore haul the section of wall closed and watched out behind them as best he could in the deep gloom that followed.
They were at the top of the stair, on a little landing where their way onward, up a few steps and along a passage of many closed doors, seemed to be blocked by two dark figures who were hissing curses at each other, when Shandril felt the first tinglings of a spell. It felt like cold tendrils, caressing her mind—without hesitation she drank the magic, her spellfire flickering in her eyes.
Each time it felt wilder. Each time she had the frightening feeling that it was going to overwhelm her thoughts and will and what inside of her was Shandril Shessair, and just burn its own willful way on in wild destruction. That feeling was growing stronger—but damn all these greedy, ruthless fools if they didn't keep on trying to snatch her, to take her spell-fire for their own.
What if they finally grew enough stone cold everyday wits and good sense to wait until she was exhausted and took her while she slept? What then?
Trembling, Shandril heard Narm make a queer sound behind her. She whirled. He was reeling, his face twisting as he looked at her wildly, nostrils flaring like a wolf smelling blood—gods! The spell had taken him—and as he reached for her, she caught the side of his head in her hand and slammed it into the stairway wall.
His eyes went dark, like two snuffed candles, and he slumped. Letting go of him, Shandril rode her rage around in a whirling turn that brought her nose to nose with Marlel—who leaned forward, frozen, with his hands out to grab at

her.
Feeling fresh magic rolling at her, the kitchenmaid from Highmoon sent spellfire racing along the paths of those unfolding spells—stabbing out through the walls around her in three directions. There were brief screams as half-seen wizards staggered, in both directions—but Shandril ignored them to snarl at the Harper, "If you had any hand in this trap, Marlel, I'll make your death slow and terrible, believe you me!"
"Lady, I never!" Marlel protested. "I—let me past and I'll take up your man and carry him! We must get to your room—here: the keys! Third door on the left along yon passage!"
He certainly looked guilty—but then, he also looked afraid, and for men who carried secrets in plenty, there often wasn't much difference between the two looks. Moreover, there might not be a man who dwelt in all Scornubel who didn't have dark secrets enough not to look guilty, if you seared him with the candle that was fear.
"Do so!" Shandril snapped, snatching the keys. "If you do him harm, I'll make you regret it for days!"
Her eyes were like two flames, and the Harper flinched away as he slipped past her. Shandril made sure the wizards in the two rooms she'd gutted moved no more, and by then Marlel was on his way past her again, panting under Narm's limp weight.
It seemed like a very short time before Marlel had them both into the room he'd indicated. Shandril made no protest when he snatched the keys back from her and used them on the door with a deftness that told her his usual profession more clearly than anything else he'd done thus far. The Harper slammed the door behind them, laid Narm gently on the bed, and whirled back to the door to drop its two wooden bars into place.
"You didn't leave anything burning, back there?" he panted.
"Why?" Shandril snapped, still furious. "Were those wizards friends of yours?"

"Lady, if the Tankard catches fire ..."
"A few floorboards were smoking. Most of what I seared, I took to ashes. I'll care about such things when my Narm is awake and—whole again."
Marlel gave her a worried look, and bent over the young mage. "Have you means of healing?" he asked quietly, after a moment. .
'Why?" Shandril asked, keeping her voice hard.
He shook his head in silent dismissal or exasperation, tapped gently at Narm's cheek, and then said, "He's coming around. That water—!" He pointed at an ewer of wash-water standing in the sink of a battered washstand. Shandril fetched it, and Marlel dipped his fingertips in it, nodded at its icy temperature, and drew a line of it down Narm's cheek.
The young mage's eyes flickered.
"Back with us. Narm?" Marlel asked loudly and jovially, throwing up a hand toward Shandril's face in a "be silent" gesture. "Ready to have a good look out at the lovely ladies of Hethbridle Street?"
Narm looked up at him dully, and the Harper waved airily at the window. "Hmm? Ready to buckle your swash, strut like a cockerel, and roar like a dragon?"
"Oh, gods," Narm muttered, "it's Torm's brother!"
Shandril exploded into giggles, a flood of mirth that dissolved into happy tears, and then her arms were around her man, shouldering Marlel aside.
The Harper drew back with a strange expression. His hand stole toward*the dagger at his belt—then fell away again, as he lifted his head and stared at the wall... in the direction of the two rooms full of wizards that Shandril had so swiftly blasted.
He swallowed and took a careful step back from the young couple. That movement was enough to bring Shandril whirling around to face him again, eyes sharp—and Marlel raised his eyebrows and his fingers in unison, waggling all of his fingertips to show that they were idle and that he meant

no harm.
Shandril let her face show that she believed him not for a moment. "And now, Sir Harper?" she asked him softly.
Marlel gave her his quick, crooked smile. "Well, now. This room is yours for the night—I've paid for it, no need to thank me, all who carry the little badge you saw are paragons of flowering honor—and you'll have to give three silvers to Pharaulee by highsun tomorrow if you need it for another night, and so on. I should tell you a little trick we use: Take some of the soot from—back there—on a finger and run it around your eyes, and just here and here on your cheeks. Then wipe most of it away again, so it looks like shadow and not black face-paint, and gods above, but the shape of your face changes! Effective, if you don't want to be recognized straightaway, hmm? But I fear I must soon disappear on other business. Is there anything else you need me to do?"
"Yes," Shandril said in a voice that was little more than a whisper. "Tell us the truth."
Marlel raised his eyebrows, and refrained from smiling. "Ah. Well. That would be a grave mistake in style, here in Scornubel." He spread his hands, still unsmiling. "Anything else?"
Narm and Shandril exchanged glances. "Marlel," Narm said faintly, wincing at a hurt remaining in his head, "we're supposed to find and meet a man named Orthil Voldovan here."
The Harper nodded. "And join his next caravan to Waterdeep? You're just in time and had best get down to the taproom and find him right now. He leaves on the morrow." He waved at the double-barred door.
Shandril looked at Narm, who winced again, then nodded. She turned her head and gave Marlel a commanding look.
That crooked smile touched his lips for a moment and went away again. "Leave nothing of value here," he said. "In Scornubel, without bars and bolts and guards whose loyalty you are certain of, locks are not to be trusted." He put a

hand on the uppermost bar he'd so recently slammed down into place, and added, "Come with me now, and I'll point out Orthil to you."

Shandril nodded and came toward him. Narm followed, a little unsteadily.

In the darkness of the room next door, a watchful eye drew back cautiously from a spyhole nigh the floor, and its owner lay still on the soft fur he'd brought with him. When he heard the keys jingle in the lock and the soft, swift footfalls of the three moving along the passage to the front stair he stood up, stretched in the gloom, plucked up his fur, and cautiously opened his door. The passage was empty, and the man wrapped in the fur cloak slipped out into it and headed for the third stair. They were the two he'd been watching for, right enough, and he knew where they intended to go, now.

He hurried to deliver that news to those who'd promised to pay well for it. There'd be a slight delay while he picked up his own bodyguards—but without them, this was one meeting he probably wouldn't have survived. No messenger grows very old without knowing which clients are the dangerous ones.

These were the very worst, which was why his bodyguards included several mages and over a dozen other men he hoped these clients didn't yet know about. The alleys of Scornubel had seen all-out battles before. - .

The broad stair Marlel took them down this time opened onto a landing overlooking the deafening, smoky din of the taproom. The Harper put a hand on Shandril's arm to bring her to a stop—then snatched it away as if he feared she'd burn him, and pointed.

"That's your man," he murmured into her ear, making sure her finger was pointing at the same man his was, "and I'd rather he didn't see me or hear about me." He rose, and slipped back up the stair past them. "We have," he murmured as he went, raising his hand in a farewell salute, "painfully unfinished business between us."

Shandril returned his wave—then he was gone into the shadows. She traded looks with Narm. They sighed in soundless unison, gave each other rueful grins, got up, and went boldly down the stair.

Orthil Voldovan sat facing their stair in the corner seat of a booth with his back to one of the stout pillars that held up the taproom ceiling. Even seated, he was tall and straight-backed, as broad as many a door at his shoulders, and with forearms like hairy tree trunks, massive, gnarled, and seemingly more solid than the stout, weathered tavern table they rested on. His eyes were like two dark daggers beneath the largest shaggy white eyebrows Shandril had ever seen, and his square-jawed face was fringed all around with a short but ragged tufting of white beard. He was not young but looked as if he could assume mighty displeasure in a moment with anyone who dared to delve into his age, and speculate on its effects. He also seemed the sort of a man for whom "mighty displeasure" might mean something on a hastily founded battlefield or something far less formal in the nearest alley.

With Voldovan sat half a dozen men in worn, stained leather armor hung about with daggers and swords and throwing axes—caravan guards, battlefield veterans, or outlawed warriors, perhaps all three. There were two eyepatches among those six men and perhaps thrice that number of visible teeth. Scars could be seen—half-hidden among bristles and tattoos—everywhere. Many coldly calculating eyes were raised from a forest of empty and half-empty tankards as Narm and Shandril approached, and out of habit hands ' dropped to the hilts of favorite weapons.

"Well, well," Voldovan remarked, looking Shandril up and down with a frank eye that made her—despite inner raging to the contrary—blush crimson, "they're letting children out after dark in Scornubel, now. Or are ye for hire as a pair, hey?"

"Orthil Voldovan?" she asked crisply. "I'd like to hire you— or

rather, your protective professional company to Water-deep, on the caravan you're leading thither on the morrow. Tessaril Winter recommended you."

Mention of the Lady Lord's name made those bushy brows shoot right up to crown Voldovan's hard face, and several of the guards stopped glaring at Narm and Shandrils' every breath and exchanged swift, dark looks.

"Well, now," the caravan master said slowly, leaning forward to look narrowly but thoroughly at the young couple. "Well, now. How is Tess, anyway?"

Shandril kept silent. "Well enough when last we saw her," Narm hastily filled the silence. "With King Azoun riding hard up to her door."

"Aye, her back door, I'll be bound," Orthil said meaningfully. "As if all his kingdom doesn't know what he's up to. Bah—kings! Overfed rogues, the lot of them!"

"So you eat rather more lightly?" Shandril asked silkily. "What, then, is your fare to Waterdeep?"

"Ten gold pieces," the caravan master said gruffly. "Full coins, mind, like lions or highcrowns—not trade-tokens or those little gilded copper shards they use suth'rds."

Southwards, Shandril interpreted mentally.

"Payable in full before we leave, not 'half now and half there.' I'm not pretty, but I'm worth it. My caravans get where they're going."

"Well, that's a good start," Shandril said calmly. "Seven gold, did you say?"

Orthil gave her a sharp look, and one of his guards laughed.

"Eleven, I said," he told her with a grin. "Ye should listen better, dearie."

"Evidently so," Shandril said, perching herself on the table in front of him and shoving his most recent tankard aside. "I could have sworn I heard you say four gold for the pair of us."

Orthil regarded her coldly, and she leaned forward to stare with great interest right back into his gaze. Two tiny flames

kindled in her eyes. From behind her, knowing what must be happening, Narm sighed and murmured, "Try not to kill anyone yet, love. They all seem to be such—gentle people."
Cold glares were lifted the young mage's way, and the oldest and most grizzled guard in the most patched and scarred leathers chuckled and leaned back to watch the unfolding fun, lifting a finger to signal a bet to his fellows.
"Four gold for the pair of ye 'tis, then," Orthil said quietly. The chorus of gasps and tiny clanks that followed came from his guards: the sounds of many jaws dropping open.
"The spellfire wench? You're sure?"
Belgon Bradraskor looked up from his littered desk with eager hunger catching fire in his pale eyes. His movement lifted the ample folds of his jowls from their customary resting place on the descending mountain of flesh that was his torso.
Standing safely in the shadows beyond the lamplight, Tornar the Eye shuddered delicately. Belgon had a wife—a tall, splendid woman—and half a dozen daughters. How they survived seeing that unclad was beyond him; as it padded around the house, it must seem like some sort of pale, quivering monster .. .
Still, the Master of the Shadows could move swiftly * enough when he had to—and his wits were as keen as any dozen caravan masters put together. For over a decade he'd seen through their every swindle and had always had a response ready ere it was needed; a very hard thing to do in the roaring, ever-lawless city of Scornubel.
"Yes, Master," Tornar said firmly. "I saw flames flare in her eyes, and she had a man with her who matches in looks, voice, and manner this Narm Tamaraith we've been told to watch for. She was with Marlel when they went upstairs but not when they came down. His trap failed. She fried all his hired mages—and perhaps him, too, though I've not seen his body."
"No, the Dark Blade of Doom has been seen not ten breaths

ago, slipping out of town by the looks of where he was headed and what he was carrying." Bradraskor's tone dripped with scorn for Marlel's self-assumed title. "And she's sitting with Voldovan in the Tankard right now?"
"Making a deal with him," Tornar confirmed. "If they agree, she'll be part of his caravan up to the Big Brawl on the morrow."
"Hmm. 'Tis a long way to Waterdeep," the Master of the Shadows said thoughtfully. "I wonder how many accidents Voldovan will have on this run."
Tornar waited for the huge man behind the desk to say more, but silence stretched until he felt moved to ask, "We're not going to try for ... ?"
"No," Bradraskor said slowly. "No, I don't think I want to die badly enough for that."
Tornar nodded, as relief flooded through him and quite drove away his fleeting disappointment. He made for the door with his usual soundless tread.
"Eye of mine," the Master of the Shadows said softly, freezing Tornar in mid-step with his gloved hand reaching for the bolt, "not quite so fast. Something occurs to me."
Tornar waited. Something always did.
"We dare not try to seize spellfire because of what would certainly befall us if we tried to hold it," Bradraskor said slowly, "when all the vultures came down with their talons to tear us apart—but by not trying for it, and lurking like a vulture ourselves, we could do some handsome harm to any of our rivals who dare to snatch at it."
Tornar turned, excitement stirring in him. "And so?"
"So I think you'll be on your way to see Bluthlock right now," the Master of the Shadows said with a soft smile. "Tell him that he can spend freely, with my backing, to thin the ranks of anyone Scornubrian he's grown tired of. There are some faces about town that we can all easily miss."
Tornar matched the Master's smile and asked, "What about Andor?"

"You mean the shapeshifter who's gosing as Andor?"
Tornar the Eye stiffened. "What?"
"Andor was found in Old Ornrim's nets in the Chionthar a little over two months back, with a goodly part of his face eaten away by the fishes."
"I never heard about this," Tornar murmured, leaning forward in frowning interest. "Ornrim went missing about then, as I recall."
The Master of the Shadows nodded. "The one who's now posing as Andor saw to that."
"And how—?"
"Do I know this? Someone saw Ornrim's neck being broken."
Tornar did not voice his question, and Bradraskor grew a slow smile. "No, not one of my other Eyes. A visiting noble, as it happens."
Tornar's lip curled. '"You've found a noble who can be trusted?"
"Do you recall the lady who put a sword through Ulbegh last summer?"
"Tessaril Winter of Eveningstar?"
Belgon Bradraskor smiled. "Faerun is such a small place, sometimes. It's comforting, how all the spiderwebs draw together in tangles and most folk don't even notice. Haste now, Tornar—I can feel someone about to tug on this most interesting of webs."
The informant nodded, went out, and carefully drew the door closed before he shivered. The last thing he'd seen had been those two pale eyes, watching him. Yes, exactly like a pale, quivering monster, padding softly through the darkness. . . .

FALLEN BY THE WAYSIDE

Ah, yes, spellspun gates. Portals, some call them. "Death-doors" is the term I prefer. The reason? Well, each step through one is a step closer to the time when your death is standing waiting for you on the other side—with a big cold grin on its face and a sword in its hand you'll have no time nor chance to avoid. 'Tis like any adventuring life, but

shorter.
Bharajak Steelshar, Warmaster For Hire
from a lecture at The Swords Club in Elturel
Year of the Bright Blade

"As I see it," Hlael said gloomily, "we're doomed if we face spellfire—and just as doomed if we fail and our superiors hear of it. Unless we can change our shapes and hide so well as to never be traced or found—or win spellfire for ourselves, and with it remove every last one of our superiors from the unfolding tapestry of life without anyone else in all Faerun seeing or guessing that we have spellfire ... we're dead men. Somehow neither of those events seems very likely."

"Enough," Korthauvar Hammantle snapped. "Move carefully, as we agreed to do, avoid mistakes, and see what befalls. Slowly and carefully, not like the ever-growing army of fool-headed magelings all falling over each other to impress Manshoon! Some of Fzoul's upperpriests have been working on tasks he set them for years and have thus far accomplished nothing that the rest of us can see—and yet live still and hold their places in councils!"

"Places we've never been offered," Hlael returned, slamming shut a spellbook in a momentary show of anger.

"Hlael! Bane take you! You've enough gloom in you for any dozen old men in a tavern! Have we not woven a splendid plan—brilliant enough to please old Iceglare himself? Have I not just recast no less than four spells of power and had all of them w.ork successfully? Just one more, and we're on our way!"

"Hear my joy and rejoicing," Hlael Toraunt of the Zhentarim told the ceiling, quiet sarcasm dripping from every syllable.

Korthauvar gave him a glare as hot as any red dragon's baleful regard, and lowered his head once more to the old and crumbling grimoire in front of him. Its theft had cost six men their lives—blood well spent, as far as he was concerned, and what use had those dolts of Candlekeep for such lore anyway? 'Twas not as if they ever used it for

anything useful... Now, if this incantation was twisted thus, and that awakening borrowed from the farscry spell crafted by Ilibrin of Old Impiltur, so—he scribbled a few notes and circled the word haethin; 'twould be necessary to work that into the unfolding of the enchantment, after the charge to ... yes

He read over his notes, rewrote them into something formal, nodded in satisfaction, and began to gather candles, several powders, two small stones he'd carried in a pouch whilst teleporting, and another, slightly larger piece of stone that had once formed the threshold of a gate in Teshwave. This should work. It might fail against certain gates, depending on the portal enchantments, but should do no harm in any event.

"Hlael," he said gently, "I believe we're ready. Read you this."

The shorter wizard shook himself all over, perhaps to hide a shiver. He stepped forward, read Korthauvar's newly drafted incantation in frowning silence, then nodded. "After the third candle?"

"Yes. Shall we?"

Hlael nodded again, and the casting began. Quiet, careful, and slow-paced the spell-weaving went, as the two wizards spread powders in a careful design around three closed circles. Placing the fragment of former threshold in the central one, they took up positions on either side of it, in the outermost circles, held up their written incantations, and began to chant— at first in unison, then in turns.

"Haethin drur athaumalae, ringra don'' With a flourish Korthauvar finished, drawing his hand gracefully closed. In slow magnificence, his newly crafted magic spread out from his circle, along the pattern of powders.

Hlael breathed a deep sigh of relief and satisfaction as the spellglow rose around them. "Well done," he said, and meant it. Blood of Bane, five new magics crafted in a day! All of them cobbled together from existing spells, to be sure, but

nonetheless newly honed and focused, like tools no one had ever made before, forged from chisels by a blacksmith to do specific tasks.
Korthauvar beamed like a lion that has made a kill he's hunted for a whole season, his smile bright in the gloomy chamber, and spread his hands.
"Now let us see what we shall see," he said delightedly. "This may all be so much wasted time, but I can't think Lady Lord Winter would dare to send the wench and her bumbling mage of a man right into our clutches in the Stonelands, or through Tunland, alone—or even risk them on a caravan to Amn or Iriaebor, where they know our watch is vigilant."
"A gate or portal, of course," Hlael agreed, "but of those that she might possibly send them through, we've only used three—and I know there are that many again in Suzail and Marsember, probably one in the King's Forest, and two or even as many as six in Westgate or thereabouts. If she didn't go through with them, we can't trace them even if they dance back and forth through one of our three."
"So we look at the three we can, and hope she did. If we find nothing, it's back to spies and farscrying—for a month or two, if it takes that long. It's not as if we dare turn to anything else, uut—there! Hah^First blood, first try! Tombgate!"
Hlael shook his head in delighted disbelief. It had been long odds, indeed, with them able to trace so little—only gates he and Korthauvar had passed through, and only Tessaril Winter because they had some of her blood from clothing cut off her by a Zhentilar warrior who'd tried to slay her while she was riding the roads, and failed. And yet—and yet, by Bane and Mystra both!
The most recent passage through Tombgate had been by three living creatures, one of them Tessaril.
"Narm Tamaraith and Shandril Shessair," Korthauvar said slowly. "It must be!"
"So we—?"

"So we make sure, if we want to keep our heads. Scor-nubel is the place to look, if they are the two we seek—but first to make sure of that. The same blood will serve us, if we use that spell you traded to me last year . .."

"To eavesdrop on Lady Lord Tessaril Winter," Hlael said smugly. "Let me cast this one; your weavings so far this day must've impressed Divine Mystra herself!"

He opened his spellbook, plucked up the stained scrap of undertunic that was their link to the distant Cormyrean officer, and cast his spell. Almost immediately he reeled back, wincing, as the scrying smoke that had begun to rotate around him roared up in a sudden flash of light and vanished.

"She's with the King," he said grimly, "and has strong shielding spells up around them both."

Korthauvar's grin was not quite a leer. "Exchanging state secrets, no doubt."

"So do we wait for them to finish? He might tarry for the morrow or even longer!"

The taller Zhentarim shook his head, stroking the dagger-like edges of beard that ran sleekly along the edge of his chin to end in two tufts. "We gamble," he said slowly. "Yonder I've a tallchest full of unwashed tankards, bloodstained dressings, and scraps of clothing, hacked-off scraps of leather war-harness. Kindly avert your eyes."

He strode to one of several looming tallchests of dark wood on the far wall, touched it in certain places while mumbling certain things, and stepped back as its door swung open. A row of shallow drawers was revealed; he slid open the fourth, selected three scraps of cloth, and said, "These belong to Highknights who almost gave their lives for their King but escaped us. I only hope one of them is with Azoun now—and that if he is, he knows something useful. Surely Lady Winter couldn't just slip off to take two people through a gate without a Highknight noticing—prying is what they do."

Hlael worked his spell again, and the whirling smoke

promptly rolled up the wall that he was facing, scattered wild twinklings and swirlings of all hues of light, and twisted into a dark,- moonlit sight of booted feet lit at ankle height by shuttered lanterns. The lanterns were set in a ring on weed-choked, now trampled ground, and the unmistakable sound of picks and shovels striking buried stones rang out repeatedly.

"Quietly, blades, quietly! You want an admiring audience?"

"The sentinels will signal if anyone draws close enough to hear," someone replied disgustedly. "If your shovelwork is so much quieter, you're welcome to wield this shovel."

"We'll need those stones piled, after, to keep the wolves from digging him up. Pluck them aside," a low voice growled.

"Wolves? What's to keep curious villagers from having a look? Lads at play, and suchlike?"

"Old Meg's ghost, and fear of the wild things of the Stonelands—Zhent wizards, and the like."

Korthauvar and Hlael exchanged unlovely grins.

"Old Meg?"

"A local witch, or so folk hereabouts think. Her hut was about four strides that way, and in Eveningstar they'll swear to you that the whole gorge is haunted, this spot right here worst of all!"

"Don't start," another of the Highknights said disgustedly, dumping another shovel-load of dirt beside his lantern. Next to that light sat a small brazier, also hooded, where a fitful fire licked up from charcoal. "You can tell us all what horrible things she'll do to us when we're done and emptying flasks back at the Lady's Tower."

"I know why the King comes up here," a new voice said, from the other side of the deepening grave, and waited for the various grunts and chuckles to rise and then die away again, "but why now? He was ah, entertaining those four sisters from Tantras not two nights ago and seemed quite taken with them, too—and they with him. Why this sudden

run right the way up the kingdom into the cold shadow of the Stonelands, to Tessaril's arms? Is she that good?"
There were just a few chuckles this time and one firm whisper: "Yes."
"No, Regrar, this can't be just the King in rut! He was frowning and tossing back his head the way he does when there's something troublesome on his mind, all the way up here. If I'm ever to do a decent job of guarding the Dragon, I have to know a lot more than I do now. Is this usual? Does he drop everything and come riding up here often?"
"Often enough, lad, often enough—and Daervin here isn't the first of us to be buried in this gorge, either—though there's never been any hint of shapeshifters before! Yet you've seen things clear enough. Azoun comes to Tessaril often, not just for her arms and her bed but as we do when we seek out old friends, men we trust, to rest easy and talk over our cares and the ongoing ruin of Faerun, and put our feet up. This ride, now, was a little different; something was eating at him. Forold?"
The low voice spoke again. "I spoke with Delmar, one of our eyes here. Vangerdahast came to Eveningstar and met with Tessaril. All manner of striding monsters and strange apparitions were seen around Eveningstar in the hours following his arrival—and they were hunted down by the Royal Magician when he came out of the Lady's Tower again, and blasted to dust and smoke."
"Old Vangey didn't look any too happy, if y'ask me," another Highknight muttered.
Forold growled a wordless agreement and asked, "Isn't it deep enough yet? We're not digging a well, you know—and Daervin's a little past complaining!"
"Patience, old blade," Regrar grunted, as a shovel rang off a rock. "Slow going, this end: Mother Chauntea left all the rocks from yon fields right here, it seems,"
"Well, lad," Forold continued, "No sooner had Vangey taken himself off back to Suzail in a cloud of spellsmoke, with a

face like old sour iron, then Tessaril was seen leading two fat priestesses of Chauntea—strangers, not seen in Eveningstar before, nor arriving, either—a little way up Eveningstar Gorge. She returned alone."
"And?"
"And promptly went to her chambers, where she cast a strong magic that involved murmuring a message over something very small that vanished when the spell was done."
"Sending a token afar, with a message on it." They could all hear the frown in Regrar's voice. "A report to the King?"
"Nay, we were already a-horse and on the way," another Highknight said grimly. "She was reporting to someone else."
"The Zhentarim?" Regrar asked. "Renegade nobles of the realm?"
"She'll bear watching, will our Tessaril," Forold said calmly. "Anyone bedding the King must know far more than she should. I've been suspicious of her for some time. All these Harpers who come tramping through here—she certainly doesn't report their visits officially."
"How do you know that?" Regrar protested, grounding his shovel and leaning on it. "There's nothing more official than telling the King directly, and if all they were doing was cuddling and cooing, what did he need the map for? Even our Dragon must do something besides rutting and hoisting goblets—he likes women who can talk and have wits to match his own, or better!"
"Bah, she doesn't talk policy and make reports!" said . another voice. "The woman's a snake!"
Another Highknight who'd been silent until now spoke up. "Whether she is or she isn't, I know what the spell was about, and the priestesses. She took them to the Tombgate and sent someone else a skull-token that will take them to its far end."
"She's setting up some sort of meeting there," Forold said

thoughtfully, "but why?"
The flames of the brazier suddenly blazed up green, then white and purple, growing brighter. "Blood of the Dragon! Someone's scrying us!" Regrar snarled. "Where's that War Wizard? Get him, quickly!"
Korthauvar looked sharply at Hlael, who hastily hissed a word and slashed his hand through the smoke in front of him. In a matter of moments the scrying-spell collapsed, the smoke fading to half-seen curls .. . then nothing.
The two wizards exchanged glances. "The Tombgate," Hlael murmured. "Old Hesperdan will know where it leads, if anyone outside Candlekeep does."
"If Hesperdan doesn't," Korthauvar said grimly, "Tessaril Winter does."
Stiff and uncomfortable in ill-fitting, much-mended leather armor and trying hard to look like the seasoned guards they weren't, Narm and Shandril exchanged brief glances through the slits in their cavernous helms and shifted their crossbows to more comfortable positions on their shoulders.
"More comfortable" was a laughable term, given the bone-jarring bouncing and pitching of the laden wagons crashing up, over, and through ruts. They both stood on high platforms that jutted out around the drovers' heads-platforms they shared with lumpy sacks and bundles that had been lashed down with enough ropes and straps to make them resemble the web-bundled prey of some very energetic spider.
Around them, half-hidden by the thick dust. Voldovan's real guards raced about on their leaping, plunging mounts, holding their saddles easily amid the tumult and glaring hard-eyed at everything and everyone. Orthil's caravan was just leaving Scornubel—and the guards wanted very much to leave the city's grasping hands and swift swindles behind. Twice Narm saw blades half-drawn warningly as local lads raced in to snatch at things or men pushing carts tried to get in the way of the caravan—whether to steal, stage an

accident, or try to trade, he could only guess.
They'd both been posted on "ready wagons," Voldovan's oldest and most leaky conveyances. Below and behind them, the steep-sided wagon beds were crammed with spare wheels and axles, boards and buckets and mallets, all wedged in with spare carrychests and barrels of water, with haybales thrust atop everything. Spare weather-sheets of old, patched ship sails were lashed down several layers deep over the arched tops of both wagons, and everything stank of fish oil, sheepfat grease, and old sweat.
Their request to go disguised in armor had vastly amused Voldovan—and pleased him, for their presence on the ready wagons freed up two of his real guards for outrider duty, rather than—as he put it—"a-wasting them to stand as targets when they could be doing something useful!"
Shandril had even drawn comfort from the leering pair of grizzled guards who'd hung extra plates of armor to clang and clatter down Shandril's front, and smeared greasy fingers around her jaw to make her look unshaven and "more've a man, har har!" One of them had taken care to lean close and momentarily pluck out the tiniest silver harp on a chain that she'd ever seen, and introduced himself baldly as "Arauntar."
The other had sent her staggering with an adjusting slap at the shoulder-plates her breastplates were hanging from and announced grandly, "Beldimarr, at yer service—hands an'jaws an' I've one o' them little trinkets, too!"
Beldimarr sported a long, snakelike white scar that ran from his right temple right down his neck, to disappear somewhere in the unwashed hairiness below. Narm stared at it in fascination until the grizzled caravan guard thrust his face into the young mage's, bestowing on Narm the fruits of breath enriched by rotting scraps of meat amid rotten teeth, and snarled, "Starin' at me, pretty boy? Well, begone with yer hungry eyes—'tis women I fancy, almost as much as—hah—they fancy me, now!"

Shandril ducked her head away to hide her mirth at Narm's incredulously gagging expression, but she needn't have bothered—Arauntar roared with laughter enough for them both. When he could speak again—still hooting with occasional glee—he slapped a crossbow into her midriff with enough force to drive her breathless, and announced gruffly, "This way up, see? An' you can crank it tight an' ready, but mind you loosen it at every stop, after you wind another tight an' ready—so as to switch back an' forth, so they're slower to break, see? An' no loading of it until you've a foe to fire at, for I do perceive that y'art violently carried away from sanity—an' I'd just as rather I didn't get violently carried away by a stray bolt from you!"

Orthil Voldovan had come up to inspect his two new standing targets at that moment, with a wolflike smile and the cheerful words, "Behold: Here be a pair of strange beasts, which folk of experience call 'fools.' "

Now, with her teeth clacking together every few breaths from the crashings of the journey—she'd already nipped her own tongue painfully, and they weren't even out of Scornubel yet!—Shandril was heartily glad her crossbow wasn't loaded . . . and in full agreement with old Orthil about she and Narm being fools, too. The drover down beside her knees was a thin, sour man by the name of Storstil, and Narm had a stouter one, Narbuth, who never stopped talking and telling jokes, even to himself.

No family or clan names were given among Voldovan's men—this seemed to be an unwritten but firm caravan rule—and they were all men, too. Narm and Shandril had counted thirty-two wagons, not counting the cook wagon, Voldovan's own "strongwagon" where the smallest, most valuable cargoes were carried ("coffers o' gems," as Beldi-marr had described the strongwagon's load, "and maps 'n' treaties 'n' coins an' things—together wi' boxes of scorpions and deadly biting vipers, to give thieves somethin' final to think about, har har"), and the two ready wagons they rode on. Everyone

riding with the caravan had been paraded before the guards so disappearances and uninvited guests among them could be noted, later, but Shandril couldn't say she remembered every face and name, or even all of those who'd looked suspicious . . . because that had been more than half of them.

Now, they could see few wagons and fewer faces of the riders, either—both because of the clouds of dust, and because of the improvised cloth masks almost everyone wore over their faces, against that dust. Shandril's eyes were already stinging as they finally left Scornubel behind, with its shouting traders and running, mud-clod-hurling boys, and gazed out on what would become a very familiar view, ahead of them: a wide vista of hills and mountains, distant and haze-shrouded off to the left, nigh the sea, and nearby and soaring to their right. Open wilderlands, of rolling hills and scrub forest, with a line of dust running ever ahead of them: the Trade Way, a-crawl with caravans.

The hills around them were alive with brigands and raiding bands of bugbears, ores, and goblins, the guards had delighted in telling every client riding with the caravan—and this was monster country, too. It was a long way to Triel, the next settlement of any size on the road—and as they passed the ashes and tumbled stones of a few burned and long-abandoned steadings, Shandril could guess why. Anything that wasn't well-armed and on the move in this lawless lower end of the Sword Coast was a sitting target waiting to be plucked. Suddenly she was grateful for the dust and the din around her and pleased to be rolling and bouncing along in the midst of thirty-odd groaning wagons. 'Twas comforting, though she knew it shouldn't be: unlike some of the small, fast caravans of a dozen wagons or even half that many, they could outrun nothing and hide nowhere. All they could do was fight whatever came at them. If it used bows, and there were a lot of them around her right now, some of them possibly in the hands of folk

who knew who she was and what she bore within her, she might not even be able to use spellflre against that "whatever" or whoever. . . .

Shandril sighed, thrust aside such gloomy thoughts, and peered all around, through the dust, like a guard with any wits at all should.

Orthil was shouting at someone and waving one of those massive, corded arms, indicating that despite the heavy brush, his outriders should spread out to each side of the road and move ahead. Reluctantly two of the younger guards spurred their horses forward, and Voldovan promptly plucked a horn up from his belt—it remained fastened there, on long leather straps of its own, Shan noticed—and blew it, in a high, clear call.

Both of the outriders replied with horn-calls of their own—and when they were done, two more sounded from the rear.

Voldovan nodded and hooked his horn back into place. Shandril concluded that she'd be hearing those horns a lot during the days ahead. The caravan master's head was never still, she noticed. He seemed to spend most of his time peering at hilltops and gullies ahead and behind, but also from time to time he rode his huge horse through the caravan, glancing sharply here and there—almost as if he feared treachery as much among his clients as attacks from as-yet-unseen, lurking perils of the wilderland around them.

Excitement—nay, apprehension—-was so strong in Shan as Scornubel disappeared in the rolling hills behind them that she could taste it and was almost sickened by it... but as the day wore on and the hot sun climbed the sky overhead, it faded into a wearying, lulling monotony of being , bruisingly jolted and nigh-deafened among the snorting, head-tossing beasts and ever-swirling dust. She could see, now, why everything—even the crossbows she and Narm held—were tethered to ring-bolts on the wagons, for 'twas all too easy to nod off and let something fall . . . and all too dangerous to leap down from a wagon and try to snatch something in the

dust, with the wagons moving steadily and ponderously along like a purposeful herd of so many rothe.

Highsun—or rather, the next stream of goodly size they came to after the sun was at its beating height—meant a rest for the beasts and the folk riding in the wagons but not for the guards. This stopping place had been used by countless caravans before, and both outlaws and prowling beasts knew it. Even before the horn-calls were ringing out to slow and turn in, and Voldovan was turning himself into a whirlwind of shoutings and cursing pointings to avoid collisions between slowing and turning wagons, the guards were down from their saddles with their mounts swiftly and expertly hobbled and were fanning out into the surrounding brush to look for lurking dangers and to mark privy-hollows.

Arauntar came creaking along through the brush with a wickedly curved sword in one hand and a handbow-gun in the other, all grim business now, moving up and down the widening ring of guards. He gave Narm and Shandril a nod of approval because they'd heeded his earlier order to stay close together ("So pr'haps two dolts can serve as one fumbling guardsword") and passed on into the treegloom—to be followed, a few moments later, by Beldimarr.

Narm nearly choked in fear at the sudden, silent appearance of the second Harper, but Beldimarr gave him a calm nod, stepped around Shandril without saying anything, and stooped to duck under the fronds of a huge fern.

Then he froze as a low, blatting horn-call rose out of the woods ahead. "Trouble," he snapped, whirling back to Narm and Shandril. "Fall back straight that way, until you can see the wagons, an' then hold there until Orthil or one of us tells you different—or something you need to fight comes right at you!"

Without another word Beldimarr whirled back under the fern again and was gone. Narm and Shandril exchanged glances, then did as they'd been told, casting fearful glances around at the forest as they went. It seemed alive with snapping

sounds and rustlings, now, but that could just be all the guards on the move, and not a foe.
Or it could be a lot of foes moving in as one.
After what seemed like a very long time, Orthil Voldovan came striding through' the trees to Narm and Shandril. "Either of ye driven horses harnessed to a wagon before?" he barked.
He didn't wait for them to shake their heads but whirled around again, waving at them curtly to accompany him.
They had to run to keep up with the caravan master as he strode along through underbrush and through branches, obviously not caring if he was heard a hundred miles off or broke every bough that dared to hang in his path. They climbed a little tree-cloaked ridge and plunged down into a wooded hollow beyond it, where a grim ring of guards was standing looking down at something in their midst.
Someone was dead.
The guards parted as Voldovan stamped up to them, and he whirled to glare at Shandril and take'her by the arm, to point down and ask, "Ye didn't have anything to do with this, now, did ye?"
Storstil would never grimace at Narbuth's babblings again. The drover lay huddled over a long, gnarled tree root where he'd obviously sat down to relieve himself, a smokeweed pouch and a broken clay pipe beside him, his distinctive red-trimmed, dun-hued tunic strewn with spilled smokeweed. His head was missing—burnt right away to a scattering of ash.
Narm swallowed and turned swiftly away, to walk a few blind steps through the trees. Shandril went white, swayed in Orthil's grip, then managed to say faintly, "No. No, Orthil, I did not."
The caravan master sighed. "So Arauntar said—good it was for ye that he went from the two of ye on to Pelgryn and then Thorst before finding ... this. Better for ye that Pel and Thorst were always between here and where ye were sent—

and saw ye not."
He turned away, and said over his shoulder, "Leave him for the wolves—after ye search him, Beldimarr, to make sure our Storstil wasn't carrying any secrets that might have made someone slay him. Bring boots, belt, all pouches and weapons, as usual. Thorst, ye're a drover now."
Thorst looked up at Shandril sharply, as if measuring her as a foe in a rocking, pitching wagon, then spat into the dead leaves and nodded without saying anything,
"With me," Voldovan ordered Narm and Shandril, as he turned to stamp back toward the wagons.
Other guards fell in around them, and they'd gone perhaps twenty paces together when the caravan master said suddenly, "I don't like it. I don't like it at all. We always lose a few on this run—clients who stray from their wagons at night to rut or empty their innards or have little covert trade-meetings that go wrong, and sometimes even a few in bright daylight, fighting off raids ... but one of our own, like this, on our first stop ..."
He shook his head and turned, hard-eyed, to glare at Shandril, then at Narm. He said bluntly, "Don't be a curse on me, now. This run's hard enough without deaths at every stop. Though I know what ye can do if 'tis needful, I also know what the lads'll do to ye if there're more slayings with no slayers before us ... or if the killings go on."
They were almost at the wagons when a drover came running out of the camp to meet them, eyes a little wild. "Spells in one of the wagons, Orthil! Two dead, at least, and 'tis still burning—folk in the wagons around all shouting that they saw this man run off into the woods or that one, or five come in, or a dozen devils dancing about with tails a-waving!"
Voldovan quickened his pace into a run. Narm and Shandril, with all the other guards, stayed with him.
As they came out into the sunlight and a sea of frightened faces, the caravan master looked back at Narm and Shandril

again. "Don't curse me," he said in a voice of dark promise. "I'm warning ye."
"Orthil," one of the guards snarled from right behind Narm. "What shall we do with these two?"
Voldovan waved a dismissive hand the size of a shovel. "Nothing," he snapped, "for now."

WILD RIDES

After the bear and the behir we come to the brigand. Vermin, the lot of them! Almost as black and strangling a plague upon honest trade as marauding ores in summer, or wolves in winter—or caravan-masters any day of the year.
Srusstakur Thond, Master Mapmaker
Know and Vanquish Thy Foe
Year of the Saddle

"One wizard I know about," Orthil Voldovan snapped, "but he was with me—with all of us, and plenty of us watching him suspiciously, too. I ask all of my clients if anyone knows spells or has a wand along, and they all stare at me like so many moon-faced, innocent sheep, and I know three or four of them at least are lying. Mayhap a dozen—or all of them! We've no time to spare for searches and hot words and beating truth out of anyone, but if this goes on, we'll make time. Right now, we must be at Face Crag by nightfall,
or the dark'll catch us strung out along the road in the Blackrocks, and it won't matter who slaughtered who in a wagon, because we'll have ores and goblins and probably ghouls, too, clawing and hacking and stabbing at us as they please, up and down the wagon line! Move, you motherless jacks! Whip the beasts, and if any wagon lags, pass it by and keep on!"
The caravan master waved at the road ahead, his gesture vicious with anger, and guards spurred away obediently. Voldovan raised his eyes to Shandril and said grimly, "I didn't gather the lads here because ye needed to hear, but because I wanted them all to know ye heard. Take great care, for thy own safety, that this wagon slows not and that

nothing ill befalls Thorst here."
"Voldovan," Shandril said with a sigh, "I want to go on living as much as you do. I mean no one in the world any ill, so long as they leave me alone. I get so tired of folk not believing that."
"Tired enough to cook them where they stand, hey? Well, we may need ye to do just that to someone ere we make Waterdeep—but mind ye warn me first, and don't go blasting folk down whenever I'm looking elsewhere." The caravan master turned his own horse away, and Shandril sighed, felt the weight of someone else's cold gaze, and looked down—right into the eyes of Thorst.
"The Master told us you were some sort of fire-mage," he whispered, his glare dark with anger, "and you look like a little lass who should be in a kitchen somewhere, or washing out chambers in an inn. You've no spellbooks along, no wand I've seen, so what are you, really?"
He shifted his hand on the reins so the cloak on his lap fell away—to reveal what he held in his other hand: another small bowgun, loaded with a wicked bolt that was pointed right into her face.
"I'm not trying to slay you," he added, "yet. I'm trying to stop you doing to me what happened to Storstil."
Shandril kept very still. "I," she said, more calmly than she felt, "can call up a very powerful fire-magic that I can't quite control. I can't tell you much more than that, because I don't know much more than that. I'm on my way to Water-deep to try to find out. The Zhentarim and some other folk are after me because they want this magic, but so far as I know, none of them know I'm here, along on this caravan. I don't want to use any magic that I don't have to, in case someone recognizes it and thereby learns that I'm here— and I certainly haven't used any of my fire on that wagon or on Storstil or anyone else since I made that deal with Orthil in the Tankard in front of all of you."
Thorst frowned. "That makes me suspicious, too," he said.

"Why did he settle for the paltry passage fee you offered?"
"If I answered that," Shandril said, "I'd be guessing. You'd best ask Orthil himself." She looked up at the sky, and added innocently, "Perhaps he was overwhelmed by my beauty."
Thorst snorted, and gave her an unlovely grin. "I like you, Lady Mysterious. At least you don't shriek or come the high-and-mighty indignance, like most of the wenches who buy passage with us." He turned the little crossbow away from her, carefully unloaded its dart, and added, "Right, then. Just don't be sending any scorching my way."
"You have my promise on that, Thorst," the unlikely looking guard replied formally, startling the drover into peering up at her again.
"I hope we make this camping place Voldovan's so frantic to reach, in time," she added, as the wagon crashed over a particularly violent array of bumps and potholes.
"Lady," he agreed from beside her feet, "so do I!"
Blue radiance whirled and flashed around her. Sharantyr calmly crouched, and stepped forward with blade raised and ready, all in one smooth motion.
Then the blue light was gone, and the paler light of normal day was around her. The woman in leathers whom Torm was pleased to call "our lady ranger" was standing in wild, trampled grass on an unfamiliar hilltop.
A height crowded with tall, dark standing stones. She swiftly drew close to one and froze to listen and peer intently, letting a long time pass as she made sure of her surroundings.
Then Sharantyr glided softly forward to where she could look around her sheltering stone, and froze again, only her eyes moving. This shadow, and that... no. Nothing.
Thankfully—unless someone or something was managing to keep very quiet and still amid this faintest ghost of a breeze—the hilltop seemed free of lurking folk or beasts. Save for one, of course: one Knight of Myth Drannor, her blade in her hand and a tiny carved skull still clutched in her fingertips.

Sharantyr stowed the carving in a belt-pouch, but kept her war-steel ready as she looked about, studying the ground now, for tracks. This might be Tsarn Tombs, if she was nigh Scornubel... or then again, it might be some place she'd never heard of, north of that lawless caravan city.

Probably Tsarn, though; it seemed right. On all sides rose wilderland hills beyond number, those to the north—she always knew when she was looking north—crowned by trees. Mountains rose in the far distance, most to the northeast but a few peaks even farther off to the northwest. A wagon road ran close by her hilltop, on the west, running slightly west of north to east of south. A river, probably the Chionthar, glimmered back sunlight in the distant northwest, beyond the road.

Small rocks and pebbles underfoot had been scuffed by boots recently. There was much trampling in the grass around the larger stones, some of it fresh, and ... she peered about at old, broken tombs that lay open in the tall grass, and smiled thinly at the painted message borne by one tall, leaning marker stone: "Beware: The Dead Walk."

They do, indeed, all too often .. . ah!

She'd found what she'd been seeking: the trail of two humans afoot, walking side by side and passing this way recently. They'd departed the hilltop northward, down into a little valley carved by a brook ... and unless her land-reading had quite departed her, that brook probably found its way down to the road.

If anything was hunting lone lady rangers in these back-lands, it'd probably seen her on the heights for more than long enough to decide how best to stalk her. Sharantyr kept her blade out and her other hand hovering above the little pouch of spell-gems Lhaeo had given her as she went.

The Scribe of Shadowdale had given her something else, too. He'd evidently spent his time well over tea with Tessaril, during her rare visits to acquaint Shaerl and Mourngrym of Cormyrean news and policies. His instructions on whom to

speak with in Scornubel and how to contact them had been quite specific.

His warnings about the dangers of the City on the Chionthar had been just as blunt and exhaustive—and far, far more numerous. Sharantyr was almost looking forward to viewing a city-sized den of energetic thieves and trying to figure out why they hadn't erupted with knives in alleys some night and all slain each other, years ago—

Up from behind a boulder ahead of her a figure rose. A crossbow cracked, and the figure ducked down again—just as a second man sprouted from behind another rock, farther off, and did the same thing. Sharantyr let fall her blade and put her finger through the slit in the outside of Lhaeo's little pouch to awaken the lone gem that rode in the outer compartment there.

She was just in time. The first hasty bolt burned past her upper arm, ripping away leather as it went, but the second whistled straight into her throat—and harmlessly on through it, as if she'd been made of smoke. Sharantyr unwound the cord from around her midriff and shook it out into a loose coil, letting one stone-weighted end hang from her hand. A deadly little obsidian knife rode in a gorget-sheath down the back of her neck, under her hair, but this little throwing-maiden seemed more useful now. Almost as useful as a personal ironguard enchantment.

Sharantyr strode on toward the first boulder without breaking stride, hoping there weren't too many brigands—and that their ranks didn't sport anyone who could work magic. Not that it was likely that a mage of power would be starving over travel-scraps out in the wilderlands when cities were full of folk who'd pay well for castings of minor magics, but. . .

She was perhaps three long strides away from the rock when the brigand rose up again and hurled a dagger into her face. There was a momentary, feathering blur as it sliced deep into her eye—or rather, whirled through her head as if she

weren't there, after its point found no eye nor socket. Her ears rang with his curses as he hastily drew a rather rusty curved sword and commenced hacking at her.

Sharantyr dropped her stonemaiden to the ground, letting only a small length of it trail from one hand held out as far as she could behind her—with his blade passing freely through her body, he could sever the cord all too easily, and then she'd be reduced to punching, kicking, gouging, and hair-pulling.

That curved blade sliced through her breast—forth and back, forth and back, veering up to cleave her nose and jaw on the third swing, and taking out her throat on the fourth. Sharantyr smiled sweetly and kept coming.

"A ghost!" her assailant wailed, going pale. "A haunt!" He whirled to flee—and Sharantyr swung the stonemaiden as hard as she could, almost throwing it. Along the cord she felt the solid jar of the blow—and the sickening yielding of his head that followed, ere he toppled silently to the grass, and bounced. Her stonemaiden sent a spattering of blood and brains on toward the second rock, and the ranger followed them, still smiling.

"Helve, you idiot!" the brigand there was roaring, as he rose and his crossbow cracked again. "Never turn your back in a fray—not even on a lone wench!"

He was a good shot. The bolt blinded her momentarily as it flashed through her right eye—and kept on going.

"Mask preserve me, Tymora save me—Shar defend me!" the second brigand swore, forced to believe what he'd been able to dismiss as clumsiness on the part of his fellow outlaw up until now. He gaped at Sharantyr as her smile widened and she sauntered toward him, hiding her trailing stonemaiden once more.

True to his own advice, this brigand backed away, never turning his eyes from her for an instant as he snatched his sword and dagger out—and tripped over some loose stones behind him, to fall headlong with a ragged cry. Sharantyr

was over his rock in a bound, stonemaiden up in both hands to strike in either direction, depending on who else might be lurking.

There was a third brigand, and a fourth, but they were far enough away that she managed to strike the frantically rolling and kicking second brigand senseless before they reached her. A blade she didn't feel tore through her, but the fists holding its hilt drove up under her ribs as hard as the thrust itself. If she hadn't leaped into the air to rob
their impact of its smashing force, some of those ribs might well have bro*ken.

From the height of her leap Sharantyr dashed the maiden's stones across the man's snarling face, and he ceased to be a concern—at about the same time as the fourth brigand reached her, slicing the air like a madman as he came with a sword almost as long as her legs. Snarling and sweating he hacked at her—back and forth and back, his slaying steel a blur.

Sharantyr was forced to drop her maiden to avoid having its cords severed a dozen times over. Then she sat down and kicked out, seeking to drive his own legs from under him and send him crashing down—but he was too large and strong to do more than hop awkwardly aside and regain his balance, still hacking furiously.

Sharantyr sighed as she watched sharp steel blaze its way back and forth through her leather-clad breast—after all, this magic wouldn't last forever, and ... ah, well. The old ways were old because they so often worked.

Buckles could hold leather very well, but the enchantment made her fingers pass through them. Though she couldn't undo them, she could unlace leathern thongs, enough to lay bare most of the curving flesh—

The brigand's eyes widened, his sword-swings slowed— and Sharantyr bent, snatched up her maiden, and struck him hard across the face with its trailing stone. With a roar of pain, he staggered away, and this time, the whirling cords

took his ankles from under him with brutal speed. There were rocks jutting from the ground beneath his head where he bounced, and it was a loosely lolling, groaning brigand from whom she retrieved her weapon, ere she glanced all around and decided there were no more foes to fell.

Sharantyr shook her head. Brigands, these days ...

She recovered her fallen sword by looping the cords of her maiden around it until she could carry it as a trussed-up bundle and strolled on her way.

Her partially unlaced state won her a seat on a heavily guarded wagon crammed with gigantic "sow-bottles" (so named for their hoglike girth) each stoutly girded in its own wooden cage. The bottles all contained mordants, which would be used to etch armor in Waterdeep—if the deadly acids ever reached the City of Splendors.

Mordants had a way of disappearing in Scornubel, and her charms notwithstanding, Sharantyr was firmly urged to wait for the next ferry when the wagon reached the Chionthar. She caused some alarm when the small forest of swordpoints so urging her passed harmlessly through one of her hands—and she underscored that surprise by calmly walking through them, so that it was with close to a dozen blades apparently plunged deep into her breast that the Knight of Myth Drannor waved a cheerful farewell and waited for that next ferry.

When he returned, the boatman—who had seen all of this—was very respectful, and Sharantyr floated up to the Scornubel docks lounging against him and humming a merry tune.

She was looking forward to seeing this lawless den of thieves and, following Lhaeo's directions, to meeting one of its law-breaking inhabitants in particular: Belgon Bradraskor. Master of the Shadows, indeed.

"Mystra and Tymora preserve me!" Shandril snarled, clawing at the nearest rail desperately as the ready-wagon struck a particularly large pothole so violently that she was sure the

racing wheels not so far beneath her would either shatter or fly off.

They did not, though the entire wagon bounced with deafening clatters of landing cargo and several sickening moments of plunging through air, as one wheel after another crashed into the unyielding earth, spitting stones in all directions like angry crossbow bolts, and made its own shrieking, rebounding leap. Shandril's untidy collection of old armor plates clanged and clashed in her face for the six-hundredth-and-something time, leaving her with yet another cut on her jaw, then fell bruisingly back again— only to rise up once more even before they all had time to swing down. She swung her head to one side with a softly but deliberately snapped curse, scrunching one eye closed, and let them batter her cheek and neck.

Even Thorst was snarling oaths and groaning in pain as the wagon raced along. The shadows were growing ever longer around them, as the sun sank no more slowly for all their haste, but Voldovan was like a bellowing madman, storming up and down the hurtling line of wagons with his whip cracking like a never-sleeping thunderbolt.

They had to make Face Crag by nightfall, camp in the defensible, stream-split cleft in its eastern face, and get their torches lit in the outer ring of braziers—massive tripods of blackened iron erected there decades ago by a coster now gone yet still praised almost daily—so brigands and beasts alike would be left trying to stare at the unknown strength of the camped caravan past a wall of flickering flames.

Any brigands who hadn't already thrown a rope or a few tree trunks across the road as a barrier, that is. If the racing wagons struck any real obstacle now, the carnage of splintered wood and crashings and screaming beasts would be—

"The crag!" a big, ragged-bearded lout, Duramagar, shouted from ahead, standing in his stirrups exultantly and waving a war-axe dangerously in one hand. "The crag!"

Shandril's wagon rumbled up over a rise and swept around a bend with its wheels shrieking and a snapped rein slashing across her face like a burning brand. In front of her, what could only be Face Crag loomed up out of the gathering dusk like a castle wall.

"hi there!" Shandril heard Orthil Voldovan roaring, from somewhere in the dust and racing wagons up ahead. "Get in there!"

From the fore, there were screams, wails, and crashings—the very things she'd been expecting since this ride had become a wild rout.

Someone had hit something, a wheel had collapsed, an axle had shattered—or a beast had simply stumbled and fallen, dragging its wagon over or down ... but no! Crossbow bolts were humming out of the dust in an angry storm, and unfamiliar riders with thrusting lances and stabbing blades were wheeling and darting in the chaos ahead, too. They were under attack by foes who'd been waiting in the cleft!

"Thorst!" Shandril shouted, bending low over the drover. "Shall I—?"

"No!" he roared, thrusting an unloaded but still eloquent bowgun up at her face, his eyes wild. "No! I'll yell to ye, if—"

A wagon sideswiped their own in a sickening squealing of rending wood, as its wheels spun their way to torn and clawing oblivion along the ready-wagon's old and battered sides, shedding daggerlike splinters in all directions, and fell away behind, lurching over onto its side. A horse reared, hooves lashing the air. Another wagon smashed into it with a thud that made Shandril's jaw rattle, spraying the air with reins, tumbling men, and more splinters.

Their foes were racing past—those who weren't skewered or swept from their saddles by flying splinters—and a hostile lance missed Shandril but tore open Thorst's shoulder, spinning him around with a snarl of pain and sending their own reins up in a wild cloud.

Shandril snatched at them, grabbing her rail again just in

time to avoid being plucked from her perch by the one rein she had managed to snag—then realized it was futile. The horses were screaming and plunging in terror, and she'd have to be stronger and heavier than they to haul back their heads and be noticed at all. They were on a wild ride that wouldn't end until they smashed into something, tipped over, or the horses calmed, fell, or faltered in exhaustion.

"Shandril!" Thorst shouted. "Help me!"

Ruined shoulder, jouncing ride, and all, the guard was still trying to get his bowgun loaded and aimed at something—and something else was banging against his knee: a full-sized crossbow that he'd unstrapped from its stowage but now lacked the strength to do anything with. Its windlass was clinking wildly in his lap as he struggled with his bowgun, teeth clenched in pain.

Shandril bent to help him and nearly pitched facefirst onto the churning hooves of the horses. Clawing at the perch and the rails and Thorst for support, she sat down hastily beside the drover.

There were shoulder-straps, she saw now—and not surprisingly, Thorst, like every other drover Shandril could remember seeing, disdained their use. Getting one arm through a strap, she threw her other around Thorst's shoulders and cradled him, steadying him as he gasped and whimpered and fought with the bow. Sweat was running down his pale face in streams, and his eyes stared around at the world wildly, barely seeing her.

A lancetip bit into wood right beside Thorst's head, and Shandril glimpsed the rider who'd put it there reeling in his saddle, letting go of his weapon to avoid being dragged from his mount as the snorting horse plunged past, tossing its head in fear.

Somewhere behind them, a man and a horse screamed in unison, raw and loud, as if each was trying to drown out the other.

"This is madness!" Shandril shouted to the wounded guard.

"We've got to get the horses stopped, before we—"
Fire burst into being off to the left—Narm's doing?—and by its light the ready-wagon's horses saw the rugged stone wall of the cleft rising up in front of them, very near and growing nearer as each plunging hoof came down. They swerved away from the fire, almost spilling Thorst and Shandril from the perch and dragging a raw roar of pain from the drover that rose almost into a shriek as the wagon tipped alarmingly . . . then crashed back to earth with bone-numbing force.
Along the widening cleft and out into the gathering night the horses ran, the wagon rumbling more slowly and heavily now. It felt as if something had half-fallen from it and was being dragged. Perhaps that, or perhaps simply training and long habit, made the horses turn again to stay on the road rather than running across it to plunge into the trees.
They were past the cleft, and—as the horses swerved around a smashed and splintered wagon that had overturned, then been dragged until its harness broke and its beasts had fled—out beyond the fray, into the deepening night.
Crossbow bolts came humming out of the trees at them. Thorst gasped as one smashed his fingers and drove his bowgun right out of his hand. Others slammed into the boards around him with loud thocking sounds.
Shandril crouched low and brought one hand up under her breasts to drive her collection of rusting armor plates up in front of her nose like a wall. She ducked her head just as a bolt shattered against the boards and showered her with its tumbling splinters.
Another glanced off the perch beside her boots and numbed her arm from fingertips to shoulder, and she heard one of the horses scream.
They were going to die here, shot down like cart-targets paraded slowly before archers, unless—unless she—
Shandril Shessair sprang to her feet and slashed out into the night with spellfire, scorching trees on one side of the road,

then the other. A bolt speeding toward her exploded in flames, came snarling on—and fell away into ashes in the air right in front of her as she frantically poured flame at it.

Panting, she sent spellfire streaking the way it had come, wondering just when Toril would run out of men trying to slay her ... and knowing the answer was: never.

Well, at least she could thin their ranks a bit. Flames kindling in her eyes, Shandril leaned low over the perch as the wagon slowed still more, and fed spellfire into the night.

DARK DEEDS BY NIGHT

'Tis something no warrior ever forgets: that satisfying moment when your sword slides deep in.

Lyonar "Lightmane" Huntsilver

Forty Summers With Drawn Sword

Year of the Lion

Yelling a stream of obscenities that often dipped into repetitive nonsense, a brigand bounded out of the night onto the perch of a bouncing wagon in the heart of Voldovan's caravan. With a wordless roar of glee he slashed his sword viciously through the belly of a fat merchant who was still scrambling to his feet in a confusion of reins.

That belly parted like ripping cloth, leaving no blood or cry of pain in its wake—and the brigand barely had time to gape in astonishment ere the merchant whipped a long, slender dagger from somewhere under that slashed paunch—and drove it up under the outlaw's jaw, snatching the man's sword out of his hand even before he started to sag.

A solid kick sent the corpse plunging to one side to vanish under the wheels of the wagon—which promptly crashed and shuddered their way over him—and the merchant quickly sat down on the perch again, leaving his seized sword pinched in the slashed guts of his false belly, crosswise across his knees, ready to be hauled forth and used in an instant.

"Not so elegant a victory as the Dark Blade of Doom is famous for," the lone merchant murmured to himself, feeling

behind him for the shield he'd found in the wagon earlier, "but 'twill do, for now. Must change this robe before someone sees me in good light, too."

Marlel shook his head, wondering how well the man he'd supplanted had been known by others along on this caravan ... and therefore, how much of this disguise could quietly be dispensed with when this fray was over.

Another brigand spurred past, threw him a look, and turned with drawn sword and unlovely smile to greet the merchant properly. He slowed his horse to get within easy reach of the cowering man at the reins—and Marlel sprang up with perfect timing to put his new-won sword in the man's face, slashing across brow and nose to blind the man with his own blood.

Shrieking curses, the brigand fell away behind the rumbling wagon, and Marlel sat down again, humming a merry tune.

"Shan!" Narm snarled and suddenly ducked away from Narbuth, springing down from the wagon perch. The guard grabbed at the young mage but missed. With a curse he leaped off the wagon after Narm, leaving it unmanned and unsteered in the tumult.

"Shan, I'm coming!" Narm shouted, darting ahead into the chaos of plunging horses, hurled lances, and running, reeling men.

Narbuth wasted no breath on cries but put his head down and grimly sprinted after the younger, slimmer wizard, hoping to catch up with him ere he made his escape or blasted them all with his spells. Deadly young bastard! Storstil's slayer, too, no doubt!

Ahead of him, Narm turned his ankle, hopped with a cry of pain, stumbled, and almost fell. Narbuth made another grab for him—then Faerun was suddenly full of a rearing horse as big as all the sky and a whooping brigand leaning down from his saddle with a glittering blade sweeping nearer—nearer—

A bright blue magical radiance crackled from behind the

brigand, and that sweeping sword tumbled past Narbuth harmlessly as the horseman threw back his head, flung up his arms, and fell from his saddle with a crash.
"Sorry," Narm panted. "I almost didn't see him in time— are you—?"
Narbuth growled, got both hands on the young mage's throat, and hauled him down to the ground by main strength. They were still there when rough hands tore them both apart and Orthil Voldovan and another of his guards glared down at them.
"Luckily, lad, I saw that," the caravan master growled, "so you'll live—for now,"
Something very cold and hard struck the side of Narm's head, and the last things he perceived, as everything swam and started to plummet, were Narbuth's grimacing face and Orthil's snarled words: "Tie his hands ere he wakes!"
Horsehair sizzled and stank right under her nose as stray spellfire licked along manes. The snorting horses made sounds very like a human's frightened sob and bolted.
Shandril sighed and wasted spellfire on a huge roiling cloud right in front of them that brought them to an abrupt, rearing halt—just long enough for her to snatch Thorst's nearest dagger out of its sheath and bring its point stabbing down on one tight-stretched harness strap.
Worn leather parted like damp parchment, leaving one file of horses nearly free. Side-straps and lead reins still held the two beasts to their fellows, but only one harness-root was still attached to the wagon. It slewed around sharply as those still-tethered horses tried to turn away from the , flames and run hard away.
A few crossbow bolts came leaping out of the flames roiling in the air around her, and one of them thudded into the flank of a horse. It shrieked, bucked, and tried to twist away from the sudden fire in its side. Shandril's world became a confusion of flying reins and frightened horses.
Snarling, she stood up and determinedly aimed spellfire

down both sides of the road, as low among the tree trunks as she could, seeking to slay or drive away whoever was firing at her. Leaves melted away into ash, and charred branches crumbled and fell into dying flames.

There were shouts from the trees and a scrambling of men. Shandril hurled fire wherever she saw movement, her flames momentarily outlining men convulsed with pain and clawing at the air, ere they screamed and fell.

"Around!" she gasped in Thorst's ear. "We must turn the wagon around!"

"What?" he gasped faintly, clawing at reins that were no longer there, "have you no spells for that? You do fire well enough!"

Shandril growled wordless frustration at him and clung to the rail as the horses kicked and bucked, dragging the ready-wagon a little farther around to the left. The maid from Highmoon peered this way and that into the trees, but saw no more lurking men. As she risked leaning out of the wagon to look back at the cleft and the confusion of wagons and running men there, a horn called, close and loud, in the trees. It was promptly answered by another back down the road, on the far side of the crag.

Galloping hooves thudded briefly, receding back to the south, and a lot of the shouting suddenly stopped. No more lances or bolts came streaking through the air, and after all the screaming and clang of steel, things seemed very quiet. Here and there charred and smoking wood snapped as it cooled, men and horses groaned .. . and a distant torrent of words drew swiftly nearer.

It was Orthil Voldovan, still riding hard but now with three grim guards beside and behind him. His whip was doubled in one hand, and there was a long, notched and bright-scarred sword in the other.

"Nameless whoreson dogs of outlaws, to despoil and slaughter and snatch away the work and coin of hardworking folk! Pox and pestilence upon them, Talona's

claws rake their vitals, Talos send them storms so they sleep not, and Beshaba make their every adventure go awry, and their every chance be lost and ruined! Ho, fire witch! Hast left me any forest, ahead? Or a blaze to smoke us all out and send us fleeing for our skins back south into the toils of those carrion wolves?"

"Hail and well met, Orthil," Shandril said grimly, standing up on her perch. "We've a horse that took a bolt here! Can you do anything for it—talk it to sleep, perchance?"

One of the guards snorted back a guffaw, and the others visibly relaxed, one of them lowering a crossbow that Shandril hadn't even noticed.

"How's Thorst?" the caravan master barked.

"How's my Narm?".

"I asked ye a—he's fine, he's with Narbuth; we stopped him running through the battle to find ye. He'll be along soon. Now, how's ThorstT

"Not good," Shandril told him. "Shoulder torn open one side, his hand the other ... I guess I'm going to have to learn to be a drover, too."

"Ye just sit there, lass, for now," Voldovan growled. 'Tour fool of a husband made the same offer, and I'm almost tempted to pair the two of ye together—or would be, if I wanted to watch a wagon crash into every tree and ditch along the way!" He turned his head. "Mulgar, cut yon horse . out of the harness, and do what ye must to quiet it, one way or t'other. We're short, mind—cut it down only if'tis too gone to save. Tarth, help him."

Thorst groaned and slumped against Shandril, and Voldovan promptly rode closer. "Report!" he snapped at the wounded man. Shandril gave him an angry glare. The caravan master gave it right back, leaning out of his saddle to thrust his chin close to hers, and better convey the full fury of his stare.

"I told her not to . . ." the drover gasped, blinking up at Orthil as if his eyes wouldn't work. "S-she tried to help ... no

treachery . . . tried to shield me ..." His strength failed, and he turned his face into Shandril's side and went limp. She put a comforting arm around him, her eyes never leaving the caravan master's. There was no fear in her gaze, only something that might have been a challenge. Silence stretched between them for a long, deepening moment ere Voldovan stirred, lifting the hand that held the whip to point over Shandril's shoulder.

"In the wagon behind ye," Orthil growled at the maid of Highmoon, "seek ye three sorts of coffers with flasks
painted on them. Yellow flask holds spoiled wine to wash clean wounds, fingerpots of sap to seal them where scarring doesn't matter, and old cloth to bind them. Red flask is merenthe to bring sleep whate'er the pain—but be sure folk swallow it and don't choke on it! Blue flask is painquench, but 'tis what's called 'dreamhappy,' mind: It leaves folk clumsy and slow-witted, not to be trusted with knives, beasts, or firetending. See to Thorst, and I'll send for ye when our search is done."

"Search?"

Not bothering to answer her, the caravan master turned his head and bellowed, "Arauntar! Beldimarr!"

Swift hoofbeats were his answer, and in a matter of moments the two guards galloped up to him, armor askew and bloody swords in hand. Beldimarr had lost his helm and was bleeding from a cut across his forehead, but both men were grinning fiercely. ',- . ,-., : vt 7

"We drove'em off; Orthil!" . , - ,;-,/... -, , i,

"I slew three!"

"Very nice," the caravan master said crushingly. "Ye two come with me now. We leave Sarlor, Tarth, and Mulgar here, to watch the wench and the woods, in case they come back again. Starting with this ready-wagon, we search every last conveyance down the line to see who's survived and if anyone's lurking. All undamaged wagons and unhurt folk, into the cleft. Call Varlamar to light yon braziers, and get

Horlo an—"
"Horlo's dead," Arauntar said bluntly.
"Belmurl?"
"He's dead, too ... or will be, by the time we get back to him."
Voldovan shook his head and pointed grimly at the ready-wagon. "Search it, and let's be going. Found any of those coffers yet, wench?"
"Easy, there," Arauntar growled. "She didn't attack our caravan."
"No, but she may well be why we were attacked," Orthil Voldovan said grimly. "I'd feed her and her lad merenthe and tie them to a tree together right now, if I thought there was some way of telling all Toril we'd left her behind and having them believe us. There isn't, so I'll use her fire magic instead ... but look ye, Shandril Shessair: I have my eye on ye, and if ye set one foot down wrong, it'll be the swift sword or the bow for ye, and we'll see if all thy precious fire will save ye from the grave!"
Guards stared nervously at Shandril, where she knelt on the perch frozen in a sideways twist, half inside the wagon-curtain and half out, looking at the caravan master.
Beldimarr licked his lips. "Uh, Master, be this talk— wise?"
"Wisdom is something I've never had .and never found a need for," Orthil told him curtly. "I run caravans, remember?"
No one laughed at the savage jest. Into the little silence that followed Shandril said calmly, "I've not found your marked coffers yet, Orthil, but I will. Send for me when you need me."
Her level tone made the guards relax visibly. Both of the Harpers nodded approvingly and almost imperceptibly.
Orthil also gave her a nod, still glowering, and wheeled his mount. He pointed at Arauntar, then at Beldimarr, and then at Shandril's wagon in silent reminder ere he spurred his wearily foaming horse to the next upright wagon and roared at the night, "Varlamar! Torches in those braziers, for the

love of all the gods!"
Arauntar and Beldimarr rode up to Shandril with muttered growls of "Sorry, lass," and swung down from their horses, handing her the reins. :
As they shouldered past her into the gloom, bloody swords first, she murmured, "Show me what to do for Thorst, will you?"
Thoadrin of the Cult reined in under the dead duskwood tree, looked around the half-seen circle of men who'd already gathered there, and then glanced back down the road. The moon was rising; he could see the distant prow of Face Crag against the sky, and the kindlings of many tiny flames thereabouts. "Report," he ordered, not bothering to keep the smile off his face. "Curthryn, you first."
"We lost Jaskel, and I think Murbryn. Others, too. The Dark Blade of Doom yet lives. He's posing as the blandreth-dealer in the maroon wagon with the yellow star on its side."
"Leave him for now," Thoadrin said. "There'll be plenty of time for a slaying to befall him later, if his next attempt to capture the lass fails. Enough of losses; what gains?"
"Three guards, and as many fat, shrieking merchants, or more."
"I slew one, and four merchants. One of them crashed his wagon," another Cult warrior said eagerly.
"I wounded a guard and two merchants—one should die soon," put in a third.
The reports continued, brief and unboasting. Thoadrin smiled in the darkness, well pleased.
He said as much to his men before asking if any of them were hurt. This had been a good harrying. He'd called them off the moment things started to turn against the Cult blades, when most of their lances and bolts were gone and the caravan guards had gotten over their shock and were seeking to strike back.
Let them wait, and lose sleep for another night where no attack would come. Untrammeled by wagons, Thoadrin's

band could take the Two Pools overland trail, probably buy more bolts from the traders at Dowan Pool, and be waiting for Voldovan's caravan two nights hence to do it all again. Yes, it had been a good harrying.

There was plenty of time yet for the caravan to be stripped down to one spellfire-wielding wench, frightened and alone, trying to race a wagon to Waterdeep ere her wounded man, lying in the back, died of his wounds.

Thoadrin's smile broadened. Yes, his men were good enough to bring things to that.

The first needle broke, but Marlel wasted no time on curses. His left boot always carried three needles and goodly lengths of thread and stout waxed cord. The latter would do for this quick stitching, to gather the gaping lips of the slashed false belly together under a hastily donned new robe from Olimer's best chest. He slashed off the trailing end of cord, let the robe fall back into place, and stowed the needle back in his boot just as the heavy boots of Voldovan's trained hounds landed upon the perch outside the curtain.

Marlel turned, blinking, as the curtain was roughly plucked back and the brute Beldimarr thrust a lantern inside, with the tip of his drawn sword glimmering beside it. A second grizzled veteran guard—Arauntar, that was the name, as much a lout as his sword-companion—brandished another ready blade a pace back, his eyes leaping here and there across the interior of Haransau Olimer's Best Blandreths wagon.

"How fare ye?" Arauntar asked bluntly. "Hurts? Goods damage? We've orders to search every wagon."

Haransau Olimer waved an airy hand. "I live, unscathed by the grace of Tymora, and so am at peace with Faerun—so long as ye guard me well when I must sleep, as must soon befall. Wherefore search away, my bold protectors—search diligently, and the watching gods shrewdly guide thee!"

"All right, all right," Beldimarr muttered. "Yer enthusiasm ' grates nigh as much as it overwhelms. Just stand aside for a

trice, and we'll—anything, Raunt?"
Arauntar was wading gingerly among hoop-topped open chests of cargo. "Blandreths look all too much like crouching men in armor," he growled back. "Good merchant, tell me: Why d'ye carry these pots uncovered? Strikes me they'll rust!" Warily he thrust his blade close to one suspicious-looking heap and stirred it with his hand.
Haransau Olimer smiled. "Ah, good warrior, 'tis precisely 'gainst rust that my best pots travel bared to the world—when the air can reach them, they rust not! A good blandreth, know you, must be special, lest the coals or fires its three feet stand in scorch it and ruin what cooks within it!"
"I thought blandreths hung above fires on chains—from tripods, like we see in camps," Beldimarr rumbled, his eyes never leaving the cautiously stalking figure of Arauntar.
"Ah, good warrior, those cauldrons of the tripods are 'great blandreths.' My beauties stand right in thy coals or thy fire but are raised on their legs above the burning!" The merchant spread his hands. "Would you like to buy one? They're just the thing for warriors who must dine by night over fires and move on again with the new day! Why, I believe—"
"I believe there're no lurking brigands here, and we've more than a score of other wagons still to check," Arauntar growled. "Another time, perhaps, Olimer. Oh, mind out: The three pots in that corner are a-crawl with rust. I'd cover these chests at dewfall, if yer wagonflaps are open."
The blandreth-dealer gave him a sickly smile. "I thank you," he said with a little bow. "I—I'll bear that in mind."
Arauntar gave him a cheery wave and swung down from the wagon. The other guard straightened slowly with the lantern in his hand, his eyes never leaving the face of the merchant.
"Call out if you see or hear anything suspicious," Beldimarr added, as he turned to follow Arauntar. "Anything at all."
"I shall, yes," the merchant assured him, clasping his hands

as men who are well satisfied—or very nervous—do. The guard nodded and strode away.

Haransau Olimer lifted both of his eyebrows and looked up at the starry sky. "And that, O watching gods," he murmured in a voice so soft that even a man standing right -behind him would have struggled to hear it, "is all I know about blandreths, so the special oils wilt stay stoppered and those pots will simply have to rust. I'd best separate them into a chest of their own ere our eagle-eyed friend next inspects my wares."

It had taken only one spell from his ring to set two wagons afire and immolate the real Haransau Olimer and his assistant in one of them. It had taken Marlel's natural guile and but a few moments of pretty speech to lure the two men into one of those wagons in search of some very good deals —and he was back in Olimer's wagon hastily donning the padded belly and one of the blandreth-dealer's second-best robes before most of the shouting began. It was a matter of moments with face paints to give himself Olimer's pimples and baggy eyes, and he was ready to emerge and gawk with the rest and later sorrowfully tell Voldovan that both his passenger and his assistant seemed to be among the missing.

That passenger, paying a wagon-owner for riding-in-shelter passage from Scornubel to Waterdeep, had been a young, slender man of few words and a face hidden in a cowl. Earlier

Olimer had confided a few suspicions regarding him to one of the guards—but the merchant's customary cheerful disposition soon returned after the disaster, and he dismissed suggestions that his passenger had been involved in fell magic with the news that he'd gathered by roundabout queries that the lad was on something of a pilgrimage to a Waterdhavian temple and considered himself both unworthy to serve his god and unable to work holy magics. Just which god, the youngling had declined to

say.
Now, of course, he was beyond questioning. Marlel looked around his wagon of clanking pots and smiled. The fat merchant had terrible taste in clothes—but oh, the food and wine the man enjoyed! None of your usual overbrewed thrusk and handfuls of stale nuts but pickled rock beetles from the Tashalar, spiced firestorm wine from Elturel, and keg after keg of roast bustard marinated in zzar!
'Twas a good thing Waterdeep wasn't all that far off, or Olimer's wardrobe of voluminous robes would soon be all Marlel would be able to fit into!
There was just time for a skewer of fried arnhake and jellied eel ere he tied the bell-cords across the wagon-flaps and took his rest for the night. Being searched was such hungry work.
"Lady," said the softly menacing voice behind the knife that gleamed in front of her throat, "am I glad to see you!"
"Not half so much," Sharantyr replied with a smile, seizing the thief's wrist and jerking hard down and toward her, so that his deadly blade plunged hilt-deep into her breast—without sound or resistance, as if she was a ghost, or a woman made of smoke—and slipping a noose of her stonemaiden around his neck, "as I am gladdened, sirrah, to see you".
Startled eyes stared at her, eyes bulged, and lingers clawed at the tightening cord. A knee shot up desperately between her legs to strike her armored codpiece with numbing force. Numbing for the thief, that is. A loop of her cord captured his knife-wrist even more tightly than it held his throat, and after a moment of frenzied and futile struggle, he sagged limply in her grasp. He was helpless, and they both knew it.
"My delight is so sharp and swift, good sir," the lady ranger continued sweetly, "because you're going to take me to see Belgon Bradraskor—or the Master of the Shadows, if you prefer his, ah, professional title."
The thief s pleading eyes managed to convey even deeper

desperation, and he clawed and wrenched at her arms in vain. This shapely woman was much stronger than she looked ... and much stronger than he was.

Sharantyr gave him another, almost impish smile and tweaked the cord she was holding to remind him wordlessly that she knew just how much air he was getting and could cut off his supply—and his life with it—at any time.

"I don't want to hurt you," she told the strangling man, "and I don't want to harm Belgon. In fact, if you give him my name, I believe he'll be pleased indeed to see me. Now, can you take me to him, or are you ... expendable?"

By a swift and rising series of panting sobs and nods the thief managed to convey his ability and deeply earnest willingness to guide this woman, whom blades couldn't touch, anywhere she pleased, this very moment, and to any number of Masters of Shadows she might care to see.

Sharantyr smiled still more broadly and did something to his wrist that made his fingers burn and his knife clatter to the ground. "Remember," she purred, making it clink on the cobblestones with the toe of her boot, "that I could have slain you and did not. I want no further unpleasantness between us. Consider me a mistake who decided to be merciful to you."

He nodded, eyes very wide, and she slipped around behind him like a graceful ghost and tightened the stonemaiden around his throat in a slip-knot, so that it made a leash. She slipped another of its cords around one of his legs below the knee and let it hang loose. If he tried to run, it could be pulled tight to trip him in an instant.

"My name is Tessaril Winter," she purred. "What's yours?"

"Ta—Taber, 1-lady."

The cord around his neck tightened suddenly, leaving him with no air at all. He sobbed, reeled as the night grew darker around him ... then the cord loosened, and he could breathe again.

"No, no," that gentle voice said, deep with sadness and

disappointment, "I want your real name."
"B-Besmer, lady."
"Lady—?"The cord twitched, warningly.
"Lady Winter!" he said hastily. "Lady Tessaril Winter."
"That's much better, Besmer," the lady behind him said approvingly. "We both grow older, though, and so doth the night—a night I could be spending with my friend Belgon."
"Y-yes?"
"Guide me," she breathed into his ear, and the thief shivered, swallowed, then started to walk, slowly and carefully, down the alley—only to be brought to choking heel.
"No," the purring voice of the ghost-lady said into his ear, "take me another way. I don't fancy this particular alley."
Slowly and very carefully, Besmer turned around, his captor turning with him like a soft-footed shadow, and asked in a tremulous voice, "Did you want to go by Rat Stair, Lady Winter, or Baluth's Hole—or do you know some other way?"
"The Hole, I think," Sharantyr told him pleasantly. "Rat Stair reminds me of all the rats I've eaten, some of them alive and uncooked, and almost all of them without sauce."
The thief caught in her cords shivered again, and started to walk very slowly and carefully across Scornubel.

SEEING FOLK WHO ARE
HARD TO GET TO SEE

When dealing with trade-rivals or slaughtering ruling dynasties, start at the top. 'Tis more dangerous, but a lot more entertaining for bystanders—and will earn you an enviable reputation. Remember: Men stand back to gaze at those they admire but leap forward to aid those they respect (or, to use a more blunt word, those they fear).
Brathmur Engelstone, Sage of Saerloon
One Trail Chosen: A Path Through Life
Year of the Highmantle

wS-she wants to see the Master," Besmer quavered to the man who'd stepped suddenly into their path with a drawn

sword in his hand, in this narrowest of dark and dripping passages. Most of Scornubel was dusty and dry, above and below ground, but this underway ran very deep, doubtless skirting an underground spring. Sharantyr had begun to think her unwilling guide just might be leading her on a needlessly extended
tour of Scornubel's darker ways—but the smell of fear was strong on him, and he seemed almost as terrified of the man now standing in front of him as of the lady behind who could strangle him in a moment or on a whim.
The sentinel said nothing and evidently needed no light to see. His response to Besmer's words was to thrust his blade, lightning-swift, under the thief's arm—straight into the woman standing behind him, who presumably held the other end of the strangling-cord that was around Besmer's throat.
Into and through her it went, as if she was made of smoke. The sentinel uttered a startled grunt and slashed about in her with his steel, just to make sure, but he might have been cleaving empty air.
"When you're finished," Sharantyr told him pleasantly, "I'd like to see Belgon. Perhaps I'll have time to play at blades with you later."
The man with the sword frowned at her over Besmer's shoulder, then asked, in a voice rough with disuse, "You know him?"
"For an answer to that, why don't you give him my name and see his reaction?"
"And what," that rough voice asked heavily, "might that name be?"
The cord twitched around Besmer's neck, and he squeaked hastily, "Winter! The Lady Tessaril Winter!"
The man gave the thief a hard look and the woman behind him an even harder one. Then he stepped back into the side-passage he'd erupted from. Behind he left the flat words, "Wait here—or die."
"Well, Besmer," Sharantyr said brightly, "we've been left

with a choice. Would you prefer to tarry? Or choose death?"
"Arauntar," Shandril murmured as a familiar form stalked past her wagon, "where's Narm?" The much-scarred veteran guard cast a look at Sarlor, Tarth, and Mulgar— who'd turned suspiciously to watch and listen, their hands going to their swordhilts—then looked back at Shandril and said, "He hit his head. Narbuth's tending him."
"No," the maid from Highmoon said flatly, lifting one of the coffers with flasks painted on it. "I'm tending him. Take me to him now or bring him to me."
The three guards stepped menacingly nearer, and she turned her fierce look on them and asked, "Well? What are you waiting for? Bring me my husband!"
"We don't take orders from you, fire-witch," Sarlor snapped, drawing his sword slowly and holding it up so she could see the torchlight glimmer along its edge. "You do as Orthil told you to, or—"
He was suddenly gazing into two eyes that blazed with tiny flames. "Or you'll do what, sir?" Shandril asked softly. "The man who stands between me and my Narm can expect to be ashes in a very short time. If none of you swaggering blades will bring me my Narm, go and get Orthil Voldovan, and I'll see if I can make him more reasonable. Or I could just go do a little wagon-searching of my own, gentle sirs— and any man who tried to stop me wouldn't have to worry about brigands on the morrow ... or ever again."
"Keep back, witch!" Mulgar snarled. The three guards hastily retreated, swords flashing up to menace her, and glanced this way and that for shields—or any handy cover.
"Sit you here, lass," Arauntar growled. "I'll go fetch Narm or Orthil for you. There's no need for flames or anyone hurt."
Shandril sighed and sat down on her wagon-perch, seeming suddenly small, young, and very close to tears. "Arauntar, you've no idea how many times I've said that these past few months—and how many folk have refused
to listen to me and died." She waved a hand at Sarlor, Tarth,

and Mulgar and added, "Don't make me add these three fools to my bone-reckoning. Please."
Strangely, no one laughed or scoffed. Arauntar merely nodded and strode hastily off into the night. The three guards lowered their swords and stared expressionlessly at Shandril, who sighed again and idly shaped a sword of flame from her fingertips.
Sarlor eyed it and started to curse softly, but Tarth slapped him to silence. Mulgar deliberately sheathed his own sword, made the downward, spreading gesture of flat, open hands that means "Enough. Let there be peace here between us," and slowly turned around to watch the night again. After a moment, Tarth also turned to take up that watch, but it was a long and wary time ere Sarlor reluctantly took his eyes off the fire-witch.
He looked swiftly back over his shoulder at her twice, thereafter, but she never moved from where she sat on the wagon-perch, head resting morosely on arms clasped around her knees . . . like many a young girl he'd seen brooding by firelight.
"Well?"
Besmer emitted a little moan and whispered, "Please, Lady, don't... don't toy with me. We must wait here."
"Besmer," the soft voice in his ear asked calmly, "what did you intend to do to me, when we first met? Rob me ... or something more?"
The thief started to shake. "Uh—I—just rob you, Lady! Truly!"
"Besmer, you're a terrible liar. What if I'd been ugly, and a man, armored so heavily that your blade couldn't touch me but so trammeled that you could snatch my purse at will? Is stealing coins how you eat?"
"M-mostly, Lady. That and . . . jobs for the Master."
"How much does such work win you, in a tenday?"
"Sometimes much." She waited, and reluctantly he added, "Sometimes little: a few coppers, a silver falcon."
A slender hand came around in front of his face. Between its

fingers were four gold coins. "I pay well for good guides," his captor said calmly, "if they give me no trouble and offer me no treachery. Remember that." The hand vanished again.

Besmer swallowed, and—his mind a-whirl—saw many possible treacheries. He also saw vividly the perils the Master of the Shadows could visit upon him for his guiding this night, or being bested by this mysterious woman, or just on a whim ...

"You're thinking of whether you'll survive to spend any coins I give you, after bringing me here," the Lady's soft voice said from behind him. "You're wondering if you can hide those coins and somehow live to spend them—if you can flee Scornubel at all. You're wondering what you can do to me if this damned cord is ever not around your neck. All of these things are as plain as the light of highsun. What I don't know is whether you want to leave Scornubel ... or if it's just too much a part of Besmer for you to dare."

Her words hung in the silence between them.

He licked his lips, swallowed—so much sweat was pouring down his face that it was dripping off his nose and chin—and whispered, "I don't want to, but now I'll have to or die. I can see that."

After another silence, he added, in a voice so low she had to almost rest her chin on the back of his neck to hear him, "Will you—take me with you, Lady? I'll do anything.. . ."

"I don't doubt that," she whispered back. "Think on this before you ask again, Besmer: We're almost certainly being listened to, right now—and where I'm going, death will be well-nigh inevitable. In truth, it might be safer for you to throw yourself onto Bradraskor's mercies."

There was another silence before he whispered, "Lady, what are you?"

As if his words had been a cue, the sentinel with the sword stepped back into the passage, said curtly, "Come," .and whirled back into his side-passage again.

"Lead on, guide," the soft voice said gently in Besmer's ear,

and the trembling thief reluctantly stepped into the side-passage.
They'd gone barely six paces before a sword thrust through Sharantyr again. She regarded the sentinel with -a raised eyebrow, and he put out his other hand to snatch the cords of her stonemaiden and snapped, "From here on, you go to see the Master alone. Leave me your sword—and your dagger, and every other weapon you have."
Sharantyr's strength held the cords immobile despite his strong tug, keeping the suddenly gargling Besmer alive. She looked straight into the sentinel's stony face and said in exact mimicry of his flat tones, "Let go of my cords—or die."
For a long moment they stared at each other, strength straining against strength and the thief staggering and clawing for air, trying desperately to turn around. Sharantyr raised one eyebrow, and the sentinel let go of the stone-maiden, stepped back a pace, and growled, "Surrender your weapons now!"
"I hired this man as a guide," Sharantyr told him calmly, taking her cord from around Besmer's neck and dropping a handful of coins into his hand. Out of habit the thief looked down at them, and she said to him, "I hope those few coins will suffice. If I need a guide again in Scornubel, I know what alley to expect you in."
Besmer stared at her, clenched his hand around the small mound of gold coins that filled his palm—then turned and ran, rubbing at his throat.
The sentinel repeated his demand, and Sharantyr turned back to him, lifted her eyebrow again, and said, "You seem slow to grasp the fact that I take no orders from you or from the Master. To borrow again the phrasing you seem to love so much, stand aside—or die."
The man's face tightened, and he lunged like a trained sword-master, thrusting his blade—through her harmlessly, as before.
Almost lazily Sharantyr swung the stonemaiden. The

sentinel's hand darted up to prevent the cords from being looped around his neck, and both stones struck his head from behind, one on either side.
Limply he sagged to the floor of the passage. Sharantyr sprang over him and walked on.
The passage took a sharp bend, where rusty blades thrust out of the wall to transfix her. She walked through them unscathed, shaking her head, and found herself locking gazes with another man, this one a grim, armored giant. He was more than a head taller than she was, though she overtopped many a man, and almost filled the small, square room the passage emptied into. The passage almost filled one wall of the giant's room, and the other three walls were similarly dominated by doors—all of rusting scraps of salvaged armor, nailed to wood beneath. The two to either side were closed, but the one straight ahead, beyond the giant, stood invitingly open, onto a passage that turned right to lamplight in the distance.
This hulking guard wore an open-faced helm. What Sharantyr could see of his face was a grotesque, fleshy mask of crisscrossing scars.
She smiled at him and said grandly, "You may introduce me: the Lady Tessaril Winter, here to see the Master of the Shadows."
The response was a slow, sneering introduction of a steel war-axe from behind the giant's back. Sharantyr eyed its wooden haft as he hefted it to the accompaniment of a deep, sinister chuckle, decided she didn't want to have bones broken at every blow, and strode nonchalantly into the room, fluffing out her hair like an exasperated courtier. He frowned at her in puzzlement, then swept his axe up and back for a slaughterhouse swing. Sharantyr launched herself at the floor between and behind his legs in a desperate dive that carried her between his tree trunk legs.
The passage floor was cold, damp, and hard, and she wallowed on it for far too long, fighting for breath and

kicking frantically. His boot-heel helped her, crashing into . her behind with bruising force as he tried to turn.
The impediment shook his ponderous balance, and the armored giant windmilled with his arms, caught his axe on the doorframe and so avoided falling. He managed to get himself turned around in time to greet one of the stones of Sharantyr's hard-swung maiden with his nose.
He bellowed with pain as his nose broke—probably for the fourteenth or fifteenth time, by the looks of it—and blood streamed forth. The other stone temporarily blinded him and sent him hopping and howling in pain, clutching at his broken browbone and bruised eye and cheek. The axe clattered to the floor, and Sharantyr booted it as hard as she could, sending it skittering only a few feet. Dazedly the guard tried to reclaim it, snatching twice at flagstones close to it. His second attempt brought his bull-thick neck within easy reach of Sharantyr's cord.
She garroted him in a single, catlike pounce and held on grimly through the frantic struggles that followed. Thrice he battered her against the passage walls, trying to dislodge this creature clinging to his head and clawing at his eyes as he gulped and choked and sobbed for air
that he could not get . . . ere he crashed to the flagstones and left her to stagger clear of him, wincing.
She'd loosed her cord the moment he'd started to fall, and he lived still. Sharantyr's own gasps for breath almost drowned out a faint gasp from behind one of the closed doors—but she heard it, looped her cord about its handle in a trice, and hauled it open.
A slender figure was whirling away from her to flee down a passage beyond; Sharantyr threw her stonemaiden at his ankles and plunged after him. Thus she was in just the right spot, when his running feet faltered and he fell, to punch the lurking spy in the face, grab his head in both hands, and bang it repeatedly on the passage floor.
The man wore three daggers strapped to him, and at least

one of them was smeared with something Sharantyr didn't like the looks of. She claimed them all, sheaths and straps, and was pleased to learn that they had black wooden hilts and leather-wrapped grips, so the magic on her wouldn't force her to just drop them the moment she drew them.

Wearing her newfound armory on her forearms and inside her left boot, the Knight of Myth Drannor trotted down the passage the spy had been in. She was unsurprised to find that it turned the same way as the visible one the armored giant had been guarding, and ended in a door with a spyhole in it.

The room beyond was large and cavernous and almost empty. In one corner stood two lamps, flanking a large old wooden desk heaped with parchments and ledgers. A mountain of a man sat behind it, peering and writing. His eyes were pale, thoughtful things, sunk deep like those of a hound above jowls that would have served many a Dales laborer as a meal.

Sharantyr watched him for a moment, then shifted to look through the spyhole in other directions. A lot of the room—along the wall nearest to her—she couldn't see, but the rest of it seemed empty, so she reached out and calmly opened the door.

The man looked up and quickly acquired a sharp look of surprise. "Who," he said, reaching even more swiftly for something behind his stacks of papers, "are you?"

"Why, Belgon, I'm deeply disappointed that you recognize me not! Tessaril Winter, Lady Lord of Eveningstar, at your service."

The Master of the Shadows scowled. "You're not Tessaril," he snapped, raising the bowgun in his hand until she could -see it clearly. It was aimed right at her face. "Try for the truth again."

"Tessaril sent me, so I thought using her name might get me to you with minimal bloodshed," the lady ranger replied. "It's worked—more or less—thus far." She glanced about the

room, seeing two other doors besides the open one next to the one she was standing in, but no other immediate menaces, and added, "I'd like that tradition to continue, if possible, between us. I've no quarrel with you, Master of the Shadows—though if you fire that toy of yours, things may change on that score rather swiftly."

Bradraskor lifted one world-weary eyebrow. "So you're here why, exactly?"

"I'm trying to catch up to two friends of mine—a young couple, he a mage, she a kitchenmaid. Their names are Narm Tamaraith and Shandril Shessair, and Tessaril sent them here to Scornubel to join a caravan under the mastery of Orthil Voldovan. You can't have failed to notice them or learn all of this already; Tess holds you in no small respect."

The Master of the Shadows did not—quite—smile. "So you seek no more of me than information?"

"Indeed."

"Learning things costs me, therefore I sell what I learn."

"I'm quite prepared to pay the going market rates," his visitor said with a smile, "and reward outrageous overpricing appropriately, too."

The fat man behind the desk sat back, his chair creaking in protest, but the aim of his bowgun strayed not one fingerwidth from her right eye. "Are you now? That's good to know. So we come to an agreement, and I impart information to you on, say, the current whereabouts, conditions, and pursuits of this Narm and Shandril—then what? Do you attack me? Leave Scornubel forthwith? Call in lurking allies? Seek for yourself what everyone else interested in these two persons seems to be after?"

"Well, now," the lady who was not Tessaril Winter replied with a twinkle dancing in her eyes, "it begins to seem as if I have information I could sell to you, too."

Belgon Bradraskor sighed. "I'm not interested in crossing tongues with you just now. I'm busy, and be aware that my time costs coins, too. You've already wasted about as much

of it as I'm willing to part with freely." The bowgun lifted warningly, and then returned to its former dead-on aim.
"Let's trade truths," his lady visitor said calmly. "Simple, utter truth, line for line. I desire to reach Narm and Shandril as swiftly as possible so I can escort and protect them. Now, what can you tell me of where they are, right now?"
Bradraskor raised an incredulous eyebrow. "Protect them? You? Lady, do you know what spellfire can—"
"Ah, careful!" the beautiful woman in leather armor said warningly, raising a finger. "You don't want to leave yourself owing me two answers, do you?"
The Master of the Shadows sighed, sat back, and waved a dismissive hand. "Lady, who are you?"
"Three answers, I'm afraid," Sharantyr told her finger disappointedly.
Belgon Bradraskor stared at his visitor—gods, but she was beautiful, too!—leaned forward, and said flatly, "If you promise me you don't intend to harm me or my works or work any magic on me or my goods at all and also tell me who you are, I'll give you safe conduct out of Scornubel, tell you exactly where your Narm and Shandril may be found, and give you a fast horse to catch them on—without delay. I'll even throw in whatever wine and food my men can swiftly find, ere you ride. Deal?"
"Add to it that you won't harm, detain, or deceive me in any way, and yes, we do," the lady in leathers told him. "Acceptable?"
"Agreed," Bradraskor told her.
"Good," she said with a smile. "Put your bowgun down, and I'll quell this slaying spell I've been holding back from you, all this time."
"What slaying—ne'er mind." The man behind the desk set down his bowgun, lifted both hands and waved them, palms out and open, so she could see that they were empty and where they were, and then said, "I'm going to ring a bell now, and summon here a man who'll fetch you that horse.

'Twill not be lame or unbroken or of nasty temper, I assure you."
Sharantyr nodded. "Do so," she replied, "and know that I am Sharantyr by name, a Knight of Myth Drannor and a friend in truth to both Tessaril and to Narm and Shandril."
"A Knight of—? The defenders of Shadowdale?"
"The same. To cross me is also to cross Storm Silverhand, the wizard Ehninster—and in this case, the War Wizards of Cormyr, too."
The Master of the Shadows stared at her for a moment, his face losing all expression, then said briskly, "Well met, then, and the gods smile upon this agreement between us. Know you in turn that Orthil's caravan left this city north along the Trade Way early today, bound for Waterdeep, and should—barring mischance, no word of which has come
south to Scornubel from travelers arriving here along the same route—have reached a defensible camping-spot known as Face Crag by now. They should be spending this night there under a torchguard, for the Blackrocks countryside they traverse is wild and known to be a-lurk with brigands, prowling bears, monsters, and the like."
He got up from the desk, shuffled ponderously around it with a large vellum scroll in his hands, and let it fall and unroll, weighted by a stick its end was stitched around. It revealed a map. The thief-lord strode onto it, and pointed with one slippered foot. "If all goes well, their next camp should be here, where this old mining trail meets the wagon-road, at a place called Orcskull Rise."
He looked up at her. "You may wish to wait until first light before riding out. You can move much more swiftly than laden wagons and so overtake them in two or three days' hard riding. By day the road is safer for a lone rider. I've no doubt of your courage or battle-skills—but Lady Sharantyr, few women dare to travel these lands alone, and there are good reasons for that. A trip-line, a dozen brigands with crossbows, or as many ores . . . your beauty and swiftness

would not save you."
Sharantyr smiled. "I must leave as soon as possible, night or day, monsters or none. My thanks for your warning and your gallantry, Master of the Shadows. I'll forget neither when I tell Tessaril what generous aid you've rendered."
Bradraskor seemed to wince, but whatever he might have been going to say was interrupted by a voice from behind Sharantyr.
"Master?"
The Master of the Shadows made a swift gesture that Sharantyr correctly interpreted as a signal to put away whatever weapon the newcomer was holding ready. She did not bother to turn, but asked lightly, "Tornar the Eye?"
There was a silence, ended by another sharp gesture from Bradraskor, and the voice spoke again, its tones not entirely free of surprise. "Tornar I am, Lady, and give you greeting. You are—?"
"Sharantyr of Shadowdale," she replied, turning until she could see both Tornar and his master. She exchanged nods with the Eye as the Master of the Shadows said, "Tornar, I'm giving Flamewind to Sharantyr, the best saddle and all. I need her ready for a long ride in the north courtyard, as swiftly as possible. Let there be two skins of water, a saddlebag of wine, and a meal—untainted and the very best. I'll escort the lady thither directly and expect Flamewind to be waiting for us when we reach the well."
Tornar bowed to them both and strode swiftly out. His master went to one of the other doors, opened it, gestured within, and asked, "Lady?"
Sharantyr took his arm as she passed and murmured, "Walk with me, Belgon. As you say, 'tis safer if a lady goes not alone."
The thief-lord winced, then stiffened as two things enveloped him: a faint, cinammonlike scent that was either his visitor or the leathers she wore and a crawling, tingling sensation that he was sure must be magic. He drew in a

deep breath as her hip brushed his huge thigh and carefully matched his pace to hers like a court gallant. They entered the shadowed passage together.
"How're you, lad?" Arauntar murmured, cradling Nairn as gently as a mother holds her child. "Head splitting, aye, but otherwise?"
"Otherwise," Narm mumbled, wincing, "I'm ... all right, I suppose. How's Shan?"
"Frightened for you, demanding you be brought to her right now, an'—ahem—a mite annoyed," the guard rumbled. "If you can walk without falling, I'd like to be getting you to her straight away."
"I'll manage," Narm grunted, snatching hold of the nearest lashing-ring on the wagon wall and hauling himself up the row of rings with trembling fingers. He clung groggily to the uppermost ring for a moment and stared down at his tingling hands. They were swollen and seemed numb and weak ...
"Narbuth bound you a little tight," the Harper explained. "I just cut you free. Catch thy breath a bit, lad—an' do something for me, if you will."
Narm looked at Arauntar, squinting against the pain, and asked faintly, "What?"
"Forget for now Orthil ordering you bound an' Jathun hitting you, all right? 'Twill be easier for us all if yer lady doesn't go frying all our heads off just yet."
The mage gave the Harper a sidelong look, smiled wryly, and replied, "I'll grant it will, at that. Right, you'll have my silence on this—for now. Now, take me to Shan, before she comes looking for me herself."
"That," Arauntar told him with a wry and gap-toothed grin, "is precisely why I want you to hurry."
Sharantyr of Shadowdale gave them a merry wave and cantered into the night. The Master of the Shadows let the arm that had saluted her in return fall back to the moonlit rim of the well and said softly to the man beside him, "Follow

her. Let her work death among all the spellfire-seekers Bluthlock has sent after Voldovan's
wagons—but when you judge the time right, make sure she dies."
Tornar nodded. "Of course, Master. She knows your looks, where you lair, and how to reach you. She must not live."
Belgon Bradraskor nodded. "A pity. No woman has ever called me gallant before."
"Hesperdan was right," Hlael mused thoughtfully.
Korthauvar sighed. "Hesperdan is always right. Why else would one feeble old man with such expensive vices yet be suffered by the Brotherhood to live?"
"Too useful to slay, too unambitious to be a danger."
"So he appears. I wonder if he isn't plotting some dark magic to someday drain us all of life and magic."
"What, to make himself master over all the Brotherhood and rise to challenge Shaaan and Larloch, Szass Tarn, and Maraunth Torr?"
"Nay, that's the gods-smile-down worst of it all. Anyone else would do such a thing to become an Archmage Most Mighty and conquer Faerun at will. Hesperdan, Bane take him, would do it as an interesting experiment!"
The gem she'd broken on the lip of the stone well had done its work. It would not last long, and its awakening had banished the ironguard that had made metal pass harmlessly through her, but Sharantyr could see and hear the two grim men as clearly as if she still stood in the courtyard, shoulder to shoulder with the Master of the Shadows and Tornar. She grinned savagely at the moon as she overheard Bradraskor's orders.
"Ah, we must all die sometime, Belgon," she told the wind. "Let you be gallant to the last, and I'll be well pleased. Of course Tornar must try to slay me. I only hope Besmer has sense enough to flee the city as fast as he can. No one must know that a lone woman marched straight in on the Master of the Shadows in his lair, defeating guards and traps at will,

forced a deal on the lord of Scornubel's thieves, and went on her way with his gifts. No sinister reputation could quite recover from such news—and no thief-lord without such a reputation can hope to last long."

As Tornar hurried away across the courtyard to where he'd no doubt left another mount waiting, her tiny magic faded away. The last Sharantyr saw of the Master of the Shadows was his brooding face, as he leaned on crossed arms on the well rim and stared into the night after her.

"Too late, Belgon," the ranger told the wind of her galloping, as her hair streamed out behind her like a dark cloud and the moon painted the Blackrocks bright before her, "and too slow. Not even Tornar can ride fast enough to save you, for rumor runs ever before him, clear across Scornubel. I learned as much myself a long time ago, when first I swung a sword and ran unclad with boys—and the little lady my parents thought I'd become was swept away by gossip, forever. Whispers fly as fast as arrows."

DAILY DISAPPEARANCES

Thrusk in the morning wakes a man, banishes sour breath, and kindles hero-fire within. It also leaves the drinker unable to taste anything else, sleepless, and swift to rage—and draws beasts near. Yet if a slinking monster disturbs a dedicated thrusk-drinker, it's often difficult from the snarls to tell one from the other.

Imgaun Cordelvur, Master of Platters

We Can All Dine Like Kings

Year of the Lost Helm

The hand on her shoulder was so gentle that for a long, murmuring time Shandril thought it was Narm's. Then her nose caught a whiff of rank breath and old sweat, and she came awake with spelllire boiling up in her, borne on a leaping flame of fear and rage—to stare into Arauntar's anxious face, as far away from her as he could be and still touch her with just the tips of his fingers.

He drew back his hand hastily and growled, "Up, lass.

Orthil's in a rare rage this morn an' will be less merry still when he finds the two of you together. I've made you a fire an' put water on, for washing and thrusk-brew."
Shandril wrinkled her nose. "Thrusk? I hate thrusk! It tastes like old boots!"
The grizzled guard grinned. "I suppose you've enjoyed a steady diet of footwear, old boots included?"
"I was maid at a small inn," Shandril told him irritably. "Lick and polish, all too oft—"
She watched Arauntar's gaze descend, realized Narm's cloak had fallen away to her waist and that she wasn't wearing a Sembian stitch of anything, and snapped, "Thank you! Now get out of here!"
"Of course, great lady," Arauntar replied, keeping his gaze now on the curving inner roof of the wagon as he quickly ducked out. "I was just leav—whoa, get clothes on, lass, an' hurry! Orthil's on his way over here with a face on him like a winter storm!"
w/s he now!" Shandril snarled, turning to the warm and oblivious man still snoring ever so slightly beside her. "Narm, love, get up!" She kissed him, put her arms around him and tickled him mercilessly—and when he started to guffaw, whipped away the cloak and blankets so that the flower of the Tamaraiths roared at the cold. "Get dressed, and hurry!"
She hastened to use the chamberpot before he could, snatched up her clothes, and went running on chilled bare feet to the corner of the wagon where she'd torn her armor off last night—or rather, where Narm had hurled it, piece by clattering piece, in his haste to peel it from her.
She was still squatting over the heap, frantically untangling and heaving aside an unfolding chaos of rusty plate and leather, when the wagon-flap fairly flew aside
and the master of the caravan strode into the remains of their bed. Kicking it aside, he glared around the wagon, past the hopping, sleepily blinking young man who was still

knuckling his eyes and feeling about for his clothes— and stopped to place the full weight of his angry stare upon the unclad woman in the corner.

Orthil Voldovan put his head to one side and smiled in a way that somehow managed to combine leering and sneering and I-told-ye-so sarcasm, and said, "Well, well, well, if it isn't the Lord and Lady of Love, right here in my own ready-wagon! Here I thought yer spells and yer fire-take-all might be of some use to us, in the trifle of trouble that's made us later in leaving than I've ever been in all my runs, later than any sane wagoneer would desire to be who wants to make Orcskull Rise by nightfall—and I find ye still cooing and moaning away in yer snug little lovenest, not in yer armor and being guards at all! Why, I've half a mind to just fling wide the flap and show all the prize fools along with us what yer up to, just to—lass, what're ye doing?"

Wearing only her tousled hair and a tight little smile, Shandril marched past him, flung wide the wagon-flap with a loud snapping of tarred cloth, and waved cheerfully to the faces that turned her way.

Jaws dropped open and stares grew intense—as she turned her back on them, put her hands on her hips, and bellowed, "Finished, Lord Love Voldovan? Can I get dressed now? Tis cold, and I really should be back in my armor and getting us out of here!"

Orthil's jaw dropped and he stared at her in bewilderment. "Wha—buh—"

"Orthil," Shandril said icily, paying no attention to the gathering crowd of gawking men behind her but knowing quite well how their numbers were swelling, "get! Unless you'd be so kind as to take that blandreth off the boil and make thrusk for us. In fact, I'd like that—and over a tankard each, you can tell us about your 'trifle of trouble/ whilst I finish getting dressed . . . after, that is, you let me start getting dressed!"

Eager hands lifted the blandreth off the fire, stirred the

thrusk, and handed tankards up to the baffled-looking caravan master. Shaking his head a little, Voldovan took them, set them down carefully, then whirled to face the crowd and roared, "Get out of here! Each of ye, to yer own beast and harness! Make ready to roll wagons—now!"

He pulled down the wagon-flap again to shut out the watching world, turned back to Narm and Shandril, and asked politely, "Thrusk, anyone?"

Narm couldn't hide his grin. Shaking his head, he accepted a steaming tankard, set it aside to avoid scalded lips, and went on settling his nondescript armor into place and rolling away bedding.

Shandril, wearing nothing but boots and the strange network of straps that would hold up her greaves and armored stomacher when they were fastened, strolled from the depths of the wagon over to Voldovan, turned her back on him, and said, "I've no Storstil nor Narbuth handy, so could you do me up, sir?"

For a moment she thought she was going to get a tankard of scalding thrusk flung over her, but instead she felt warm breath on her bare shoulder blades and heard the loud hissing of the caravan master heaving a gusty sigh. The sound of tankards being carefully set down again followed, and then rough-surfaced knuckles were gently snugging straps together down her back.

Orthil said in a low voice, "I—my apologies, both of ye. I'm . . . not a happy man, this morn. There was more trouble in the night."

"What sort of trouble?" Narm asked, taking his first cautious sip of thrusk—then grimacing and wishing he hadn't. Boiled tongue for breakfast again.

"More folk gone."

"Gone?" Shandril asked, as wiry, dirty hair brushed her behind and those hardened fingers laced and buckled their ways down to her ankles.

"Gone—vanished, leaving their wagons behind, goods and

all. If they fought, we heard it not, and no one saw anything. I sent the lads out to search the woods and they found tracks, right enough: leucrotta and bear, plus a little blood here and there."

Narm and Shandril both heard the "but" in the caravan master's tone. Shan turned to regard Voldovan with a thoughtful frown on her face, but it was Narm who prompted him. "But—?"

"The tracks don't come close to any wagons. The beasts might have scavenged the dead, but they didn't drag or chase them away from camp. Why'd the men stray? Or did someone—a few men at least, it'd take—creep in with knife or strangle-wire and carry them off? If so, why steal nothing? Folk scared by brigands and all our warnings don't just wander from their wagons, right past my guards, and get clear out of a rock cleft unseen!"

"You need our magic," Narm said quietly, "now that you've come and seen and made sure we aren't the murderers you're looking for."

"I've made sure of nothing, lad," Voldovan told him heavily, "but for what 'tis worth, no, I don't think either of ye were snatching away a dozen merchants last night. I—I don't hold with wizards. There's none in Scornubel as I'd trust within a kingdom of me, and I can't afford one casting from any of'em, let alone entice one to set foot in the Blackrocks and ride guard for me. Damned expensive, arrogant nuisances, but when ye need them, ye really need them!"

The caravan master took a swig of steaming thrusk that would have cooked Narm's gullet, realized who he was talking to, and added hastily, "Uh, no offense meant to ye, lad and lady."

Back in her corner, Shandril waved a dismissive hand and returned to Voldovan with a despairing look and the heavy chaos of her breastplate in her arms. The caravan master drained his tankard in another throat-scalding swig, hastily lifted the garment, and turned it so that she could step in

under his hands and let him lower it into place.
"Watch this," the maid from Highmoon said sharply to her husband. "I won't be troubling Master Voldovan to be dressing me every morn, no matter how much he enjoys it."
Orthil gave her a half-amused snort and said grimly to Narm, "Ye may have to get battle-spells ready, lad, if this goes on. Those brigands haven't done with us. They probably took the Two Pools trail and will be waiting for us next night. Or they're shadowing us, along the ridges. Either way, we're so much cook-meat on firespits once they learn how weak we're getting."
"Voldovan?" a rough but familiar voice called from close by outside the wagon.
"In!" the caravan master called curtly, and Arauntar thrust his head in at the flap, Beldimarr at his shoulder. "Well?"
"We've searched all. Nothing."
"Just gone, hey?"
The veteran guards nodded in grim unison.
"Any of the wagons better than what's still rolling?"
Arauntar shook his head. "Two clients lost theirs, an' we've shifted them to the best abandoned ones already. Valuable cargo, food, an' wagon wheels are in the other ready-wagon. Packed to the high hoops, 'tis."
"Thank the gods ye two know what to do. Anything to come in here?"
"A dozen strongchests an' a water barrel, if there's room."
"Oh, there'll be room. With just the lass riding the perch and one of ye as drover, we can pack this one to the hoops, too. Gods, but the hay's going fast."
"We'll be staying together," Narm said quietly, "Shan and me. At all times."
Orthil glared at him. "Oh ye will, will ye?"
"Yes," Shandril told him crisply, hefting her helmet. "We will, Orthil."
"That'd be best," Arauntar said quickly, ere Voldovan could draw breath for the angry tirade that by the look on his face

seemed to be building swiftly to an eruption, "now that so many of us guards're down. With 'em both together, it takes only one of us to watch 'em. B'marr and I can take turns at that."
Beldimarr nodded, and then looked at Orthil.
"Well," the caravan master growled, "seeing as how ye seem to have it all worked out, why don't we just do that?" He eyed Narm and Shandril suspiciously, then whirled to peer at Arauntar and Beldimarr.
After a long, narrow-eyed look, Voldovan turned back to the mage and the spellfire-maid and growled, "If I thought ye'd worked a spell on these two to get them to say aye to yer plan, it'd be my sword ye'd both be feeling about now." He sighed. "My scheme was to have a hold over ye, lass, to guard against any tyranny ye might feel the need of dispensing, by having thy husband elsewhere, in our grasp. I can make the same threats with crossbows, if need be. Be warned."
"Oh, aye," Beldimarr growled before Shandril could reply, "one more thing: Carngaur died. The lance must've been poisoned."
"Buried?"
"Nay—let him poison a few leucrotta an' do us all one last service. He's back in the woods a-ways."
The caravan master nodded, sighed again, and made a large, circular knot in one of the tally-cords at his belt.
"He has a wife," Arauntar said softly, and Orthil frowned and changed the knot to another. Then his hands went to his other hip and held up some of the cords hanging there.
"We haven't the day it would take to tally every last chest and coffer and cask moved here or there; just tell me what wagons to tie off."
"Well, now. Dead folk can't pay us outstanding passage costs—an' we're going to have a real battle if we try to charge men who lost wagons any costs that come with another one we salvaged, to give to them...."

The caravan master and his senior guard were already out of the wagon and tramping away, the problem of the young mage and the fire-witch forgotten.
Beldimarr gave Narm and Shandril a gap-toothed grin and said, "That went rather well, hey?"
Shandril nodded, but Narm frowned. "Those cords?"
"Tallies, knotted an' unknotted to track payments an' debts an' cargo amounts."
"Yes, but what's to stop Voldovan or any master from making whatever knots he pleases?"
The scarred, coarse-tongued caravan guard gave Narm a severe look and growled, "His love for retaining his own head. Now let's be loading. If we're not ready to roll when the horn calls, 'twill be our heads in the next stew-blandreth."
Shandril gave him a scornful look. "Just save breath and stop trying to scare us, B'marr. You don't boil heads for stew."
"Nay, you're right about that. I leave that to Raunt, who's better'n'me with salt an' suchlike."
He gave the young couple a sidelong grin. Shandril answered it with another sour look and asked, "I suppose nothing frightens veteran Harpers like you?"
Beldimarr's unlovely head and fearsome mustache turned her way and Shandril found herself looking into eyes that seemed older than she thought they'd be.
"Oh now, lass, I wouldn't say that. I wouldn't say that at all. We've just learned not to waste time worrying, or noise fretting to others about it. I'm scared of a goodly handful of things right now."
"Oh?" Shandril shook her head, and gave him a little grin. "Somehow that makes me feel better. A goodly handful, eh?" She pointed at the wagon-flap. "Therefore tremble and depart."
"As you command, fire-witch," the Harper said good-naturedly and stepped down from the wagon with a grunt. Settling his swordbelt into place, Narm strolled across the

floorboards to watch Beldimarr go—and was sent staggering by the arrival of the first coffer, tossed into his midriff with deadly accuracy by the guard outside. Shandril sputtered with laughter as Narm found an unexpected seat upon the roll of bedding and sprang forward to catch the next box herself. It clanged into her frontal collection of armor plates, rebounded up into her chin, and left her wishing she had put on her hot, heavy helm.

Another day was under way in earnest, it seemed, and familiar aches and pains swiftly returned to register their protests. Shandril and Narm gave each other wry grins and commenced fielding coffers, not bothering about proper stowage. The casks would determine that, with Beldimarr's roared directions, when they started arriving.

"I'm not spending my life running caravans," Narm grunted. "This one is more than enough."

Shandril wrinkled her nose at him. "I wonder how many folk have said that before?"

The man who was not Haransau Olimer smiled a soft smile as he watched the taller and dirtier of Voldovan's head guards stride purposefully past, several more sword-dogs in his wake. All it had taken was a bewildered comment about a certain wagon "clanking" to another merchant nursing thrusk over a fire. Even suspicious merchants talk. Especially suspicious merchants talk—and as weakened and scared as these guards were, now, they'd even learned to listen.

The Dark Blade of Doom was a long way from familiar alleys and hiding-holes, now. In fact, everyone's favorite Marlel was trapped amid wolves who hid behind masks. Little games like this could tug a few of those masks into slipping—but the spells their wearers could hurl could snatch away his life in an instant. He'd need spellfire to have any hope of standing against them.

Spellfire. Well, now. What a coincidence. ... *

"Watch, now," Sabran the Weaver murmured to his business

partner. "They're coming this way again."
"Dolts," Mhegras Master-of-Furs snapped, whirling back into the wagon. "Do they really think that searching us once more will show them things they somehow missed the last dozen times? This fool of a Voldovan'll give every last prowling beast and desperate fool of a brigand a chance at us, going so slowly! We should have been up and away at dawn, not waiting around for his self-important sword-heads to tramp all over us one more time!"
"Easy, lad," Sabran said. "You're here to learn patience, remember?"
Mhegras snorted. "As if the Brotherhood puts any value on that! All it really seems to mean in our ranks is 'underlings smiling and submitting as superiors do stupid things to them.'"
"Ah," Sabran replied with a little smile, "you're learning already."
Mhegras muttered angrily, "Well, listening to clever sayings from smug priests of Bane isn't why / joined the Zhentarim! I —"
"You joined for power," the weaver snapped back. "Like all the other young fools who think they can rule the world if they can just steal one more spell. Here were all these magics on offer, in return for a little groveling! I'm always amazed at how swiftly such trifling obediences become too high a price to pay for you arrogant puppies—and how each of you so clumsily plots treachery, thinking you're somehow special and your fate will be different from all your fellows you see slapped down all around you."
"You're the one who thinks yourself special," the wizard hissed. "You and all the rest of your smug brethre—"
"Fair morn to you, Swordmaster," Sabran said pleasantly. "I must confess my partner and I are fretting over the lateness of our departure. This certainly doesn't seem a safe y place to spend another night!"
"Nay, ye've got that right," Arauntar grunted, stepping up

into the wagon with two grim guards in tow. "We're almost ready to roll—but I've orders to search four wagons once more, first, and I'm afraid yours is one of them. I'd like to do this quickly and take myself out of your way again, so . .."
"Of course," the weaver replied. "We've moved nothing since your last look: finished garments to the left, bolts to the right, our own effects at the back ..."
Mhegras stood glowering in the narrow cleared passage between the stacked and wedged tallchests and carry-coffers as the guards shuffled forward, moving a few coffers and peering halfheartedly into a tallchest or two.
"The flat carry-coffers all hold bolts of the same fabric," the weaver offered, watching a guard wrestle a coffertop off and peer suspiciously into its interior. "Musterdelvys."
Arauntar nodded and tapped a palm-sized painted plaque that had been slipped into a frame on one side of a tallchest. "Remind me one again what these symbols mean, please."
"Three stripes? Livery," Sabran explained. "Tabards and lambrequins for noble clients in Waterdeep, who desire all of their guards to wear their colors. Very wealthy patrons."
"We'll try not to keep them waiting longer than we have to," the caravan guard replied heavily and tapped a plaque with another symbol. "This one?"
"Mine," the furrier said quickly, stepping forward. "Pelicons of the finest make, also bound for sale in Waterdeep."
"Pelicons?"
"Open, fur-trimmed overcloaks worn by ladies of fashion, Swordmaster," Mhegras explained curtly.
"Ah. Fancycloaks!"
The furrier looked pained. "A particular sort of, ah, 'fancycloak,' sirrah, just as not all armor is the same." '
"Hunhh. Fashion, to be sure," Arauntar replied, his eyes fixed on the other two guards. They were busily shifting aside carry-coffers and peering behind them, making sure that nothing had been hidden along the sides of the wagon. He caught sight of something long and wooden at about the

same time as they did—not the usual wedges, but something like a spar.
"Just what," he asked mildly, as the guard Lavlaryn triumphantly plucked one of them up and hefted it, "are these?"
"Peles, Swordmaster," the weaver said calmly. "A side-cargo we're carrying in hopes of recovering an outstanding debt."
Arauntar stared at the long-shafted wooden paddle, noting approvingly that Lavlaryn was paying particular
attention to the ends and running his hands over it in search of secret hiding places or things that might twist or turn or ... no, 'twas simply carved wood, a sapling mated to a paddle end too wide and shallow to be useful steering a boat in water.
"Just what does one use a pele for?"
"Putting bread, pies, and pastries in ovens and taking them forth again," the weaver explained. "As we've said before, Swordmaster, we've really nothing to hide here, an—"
There was a crash, as of armor clashing against armor, and the wagon shook. An expression of rage passed over the furrier's face, and he made as if to stride forward and grab someone, just for a moment—ere he let his face go blank again and his hands fall back to his sides. Arauntar observed this with interest as he watched both merchants for swift or covert movements, and Lavlaryn calmly drew forth a half-wound bowgun from his belt and began to winch it tight.
Onthur was the heavier of the two guards, and he was doing just what Arauntar had told him to: jumping up and down in one spot, in a place where he could grab a support-brace to keep from falling over if he had to. The entire floor of this wagon was false, raised about the width of a large man's hand above what it should be—and Orthil very much wanted to know what was hidden there.
Arms, it sounded like, or perhaps armor. Crash. Onthur looked to Arauntar for direction. The guard held up a staying hand in reply as he half-drew his sword and stepped forward.

Lavlaryn was furiously readying his bowgun as Onthur stopped leaping and silence fell.

Into it Arauntar said calmly, "I'm glad ye've nothing to hide, merchants—because that should mean there won't be any unpleasantness about yer showing us yer hidden cargo. We haven't searched this wagon so often out of accident, nor for our own amusement. We spotted the false floor right away and figured ye were just getting something out of Scornubel unseen . . . but as time passes and attacks come down on us swift and heavy, Master Voldovan thought it'd be best if we knew all yer little secrets."

"Of course, Swordmaster," the weaver began, but the furrier drowned him out.

"Nothing in this wagon has anything to do with brigands or poses any danger to anyone on the run."

"Of course," Arauntar agreed, as Onthur lazily drew two throwing-daggers and Lavlaryn brought his now-ready bowgun down into a steady aim at the furrier's face. "However, my orders are very blunt and very clear: I am to see all, and so will Master Orthil—and we shall judge dangers . . . and consequences."

The weaver sighed and waved one hand in a gesture of submission. "In the interests of saving time, why don't I go with one of your men and fetch Master Voldovan now? If you really must see it all, we should bring back several guards to shift things, or we'll be spending the day camped right here . . . where we were attacked last night and where so many folk went missing. I'm sure none of us would want that."

Arauntar gave Sabran a smile that had very little mirth in it, and said, "So much, at least, we agree upon. Go with Onthur now."

Flamewind was a good horse—a princely gift, in fact, even if the Master of the Shadows had followed up his munificence with a death sentence—but Flamewind was now something else, too: exhausted.

Sharantyr had ridden all night and through the dawn, and if

she'd been anywhere else but the Blackrocks, the merciful thing to do would have been to let Flamewind drink, and eat, and rest for two days, at least.

However, to leave any creature alone in this stretch of country—especially here along the Trade Way, which predators regarded more or less as an ever-laden butcher's block, providing ready meal after ready meal—was very far from merciful.

Wherefore Sharantyr now walked along the wagon-road, leading her unsteady horse through the bright morning. She could see Face Crag in the distance, not all that far ahead—but, on foot and walking slowly, still a very long way off.

The rustling she'd been expecting for some time occurred at that moment, and she laid her hand upon Lhaeo's little pouch and waited quite calmly for the attack to come.

There were four men—lawless adventurers wielding swords and not bows or spells—and they stood large and tall in their dirty and mismatched armor. They swaggered down out of the trees without haste and ranged themselves across her path with crossed arms and confident sneers.

"Well, well," the tallest one said slowly, an unfriendly and yet at the same time overly friendly gleam in his eyes. "The gods do bring us some wonderful things. Gems, good swords, coins in plenty ... and now, a beautiful wench."

"I'm in haste," Sharantyr said warningly, not slowing her slow but steady walk, "and shan't suffer any delay. Please stand aside."

"Shan't you, now?" another of the brigands laughed, as his fellows snorted and guffawed.

"I thank you for your generous and courteous warning, lady fair," the tallest outlaw told Sharantyr mockingly. "But I fear we must insist you tarry with us—detained, you might say, at our pleasure."

Sharantyr sighed, drew her blade, and broke a gem across its keen edge. "Then it must be swords between us," she warned.

There was another chorus of laughter and snorts of mirth—wrapped around loud groans of mock sorrow, this time. They waved their own swords at her and took a step forward in unison.

"Don't slay her outright," the leader said. " 'Twill be far less fun with a corpse!"

Sharantyr gave him a wintry smile. "My thoughts exactly," she replied. "Wherefore I'd prefer to spare you. Live to fight another day, sirs. You stand in peril of death if you attack me."

"We'll be the judge of that," the tallest brigand sneered. "You're not the only one running around Faerun with a little magic, you know."

He nodded to his fellows, and they all muttered something, more or less in unison. Shandril let fall Flamewind's reins and took a step or two away, in case some fell magic should smite her weary mount whilst rebounding from her own protective enchantments.

The brigands' blades were suddenly alive with blue fire—arcs of tiny flames that leaped hungrily back and forth from blade to blade. They grinned at her from behind their risen, crawling magic, fanned out so as to imperil her far to her left and her right as well as straight ahead, steel to steel. They came at her in a rush, sparks flashing among the blue fire of their swords.

SMALL SECRETS, LARGE SWORDS

There's nothing like a sharp sword for opening men and letting their secrets run out.

Alusair Nacacia Obarskyr
Why I Ride Men And Not Thrones
Year of the Bow

Malivur let fall his wagon-flap disgustedly. "Still searching — while we sit here within easy reach of whoever sworded us last night!"

"We'll be older, so much is certain, before we see Waterdeep," Krostal agreed calmly, running his fingers through his ginger beard as his dark-robed partner stormed past like a fuming thundercloud, striding down the wagon to the decanters one more time.

The low-pitched clink of the stopper told him it was the fire-sweet green alanthe from Sheirtalar that was suffering depredations this time. Good; he hated the stuff—too sweet, and yet as tart as the yhaumarind they ate bowlsful of in the Tashalar. Brrrhh.

"What is this Voldovan thinking?" the spice-merchant burst out, waving a goblet that was half empty already. "He's supposed to be the best of masters on this run, not a ox-headed idiot!"

"I'm sure he is, and doing whatever seems most wise to him," Krostal said soothingly.

"I'm sure he's a wind-roaring tyrant, a lying, cheating whoreson rogue, and a—a treacherous fiend in league with too many brigands for us all to fight! Why else call a halt in the Blackrocks but to leave us undefended while the wolves gather dozens deep around us? Why—"

"Why storm and roar so?" Krostal asked mildly. "He'll only hear us and set his dogs to listening at our flaps ... and who knows what they might hear before you master your temper?"

"Temper? Temper! I'll show you temper, you gutter-born sneaking slybeard! Why—"

"Why, I wonder how 'tis I endure your slow-witted foolery, these stretching days!" Krostal said quickly, saying Malivur's next words half a syllable ahead of his wagon-partner.

Who fell silent, glaring at him down the length of the wagon with eyes that promised swift death in their green glitter. For a moment, Krostal could have sworn the goblet beneath them shone back that fell green glow . . . then the dark-robed wizard lifted the goblet, drained it in menacing silence, and snarled softly, as he strode forward like a stalking cat, "Have a care, gutter-thief. I can destroy you at will and hear no word of protest from our superiors for doing so. They told me to keep a very careful watch on you—for the treachery they fully expect you to work when spellfire's within our grasp."

The ginger-bearded seller of imported Lantanna clockworks—toys, self-igniting timer lamps, and musical devices! Rare and strange; get them while you can!—who was indeed a master thief for the Cult of the Dragon in his off hours, smiled easily at the raging wizard. "You think I wasn't told the same thing about you? Really, Malivur, you're very much the self-important child at times! Have some more alanthe and master your raging or I'll make sure the far more powerful wizard the Followers sent along on this admittedly cursed caravan sees and hears you. If his ears fill with one of your indiscreet tantrums, it'll take him about two breaths to muzzle you properly and permanently, without any direction from me."

The dark-robed wizard froze, then stroked his oiled black mustache very slowly and almost whispered, "What other Cult wizard? Or is this another of your tasteless, dangerous lies?"

"Oh, no, seller-of-spices, this is dark, blunt truth. He's probably not the only Cult mage along on this run, either. He's just the only one I know by looks, though I'm sure I'm not supposed to have ever seen him or know who he is."

Malivur hissed like a snake, a habit of thoughtfulness rather

than malice, and swirled his empty goblet as if it still held something. When he spoke again, his fury was gone. "Is it your judgment, Krostal, that we've any hope of seizing the wench and wresting the secrets of spellfire from her—or just slaughtering her and avenging the Sacred Ones she destroyed?"

"I'm beginning to doubt we can do either," the ginger-bearded thief replied, lifting the flap again to look for guards or merchants who might have wandered to where they could overhear. "Yet if I was confident we could do one of those two things, I'd say the latter. A falling beam or the hooves of a maddened horse could slay this Shandril—she's just a lass, after all—but to hold her, after you'd somehow captured her, is something I doubt anyone in Faerun could do."

"Mmmph. Not even a zulkir of Thay or the one called Larloch?"

Krostal shrugged. "Who knows what they can do? What's truth in talk of their deeds and what's tavern embellishment?"

"Your point is good," Malivur agreed, slowly returning to the decanters, "and yet such reputations bring attention and attacks. No one of repute can last for long unless they hide themselves well or hold true power. We must close our hands around this Shandril cautiously, lest, say, the infamous Elminster appear and destroy us at the moment of our victory ... or beset us on one side whilst we battle spellfire on the other. He did so before, recall you, when this same lass and her mageling were in Rauglothgor's lair."

Krostal shrugged again. "I've never curbed what I dare do for fear of the grand and great. One can't live guided by fear of these great heroes, unless one has centuries to spend idle in cautious waiting. When do they really show up, ever? Have you been confounded by one when hurling spells for the Cult—when you slew that mage in Westgate, say, and took his wealth for the Followers? Of course not. One stands and falls on one's own efforts. If one is good at it and resists the

invariably fatal temptation to sit on a throne somewhere, one never even comes to the attention of the 'big folk' like Elminster, the Blackstaff, and the Seven Sisters we hear so much about!"
Malivur set down the alanthe decanter, raised his refilled goblet, and smiled a trifle ruefully. "Then here's to obscurity."
The thief smiled, raised an imaginary goblet in salute, and replied, "Here's to fewer angry outbursts, seller-of-spices, for silence may help to win us obscurity. I don't want to crow with triumph. / want to have spellfire in my hand like a dagger in the night and slay my foes before they know my stroke is coming, or that I am nigh, or even what slew them."
"That's the way of thieves," the Cult mage replied, "not wizards."
Krostal nodded. "Beyond that handful of 'big folk,'" he asked lightly, "how many old, powerful wizards do you know?"
"No, I want both of ye," the caravan master said sourly, snatching a look back over his shoulder to make sure Onthur was keeping the weaver out of earshot. "There could be walking skeletons or clawing-at-us corpses or even helmed horrors under that floor—and yon bastard get of a serpent would stand there smiling at me while his little surprises tore my men apart!"
"Cheery image," Shandril commented wryly. "Lead on."
Orthil Voldovan gave her a suspicious look and then rounded on Narm. "Well? And ye?"
"Where she goes, I go," Narm said quietly. "We told you that."
"Hmmph, yes. Come on, then!"
It was only a few hurrying strides to the wagon, but the eyes of the entire caravan seemed to be on the small knot of guards trotting along with the weaver. Voldovan seemed not to see the audience, but Beldimarr and two other guards smoothly stepped aside to take up positions around the wagon, facing out to keep the curious at a distance, while

everyone else boiled up into the wagon with loaded bowguns, and herded Sabran down to join the indignantly sputtering Mhegras.
"I-I-protest in the strongest possible term—" he began, but the caravan master drowned him out.
"//ye'd dealt with me more honestly, ye two, I'd be politeness itself to ye, but 'tis a bit late for protests now. If ye'd like this to take as little time as possible and win for yerselves
the best treatment I can find in myself to give ye, kindly reveal the swiftest and least damaging way to take up this floor—or I just might be inclined to use axes and make my own haste!"
"That won't be necessary, Roadmaster," Sabran said calmly. "If you light two lanterns and take up these two boards here, you'll find cross-spars. Pull them along, and you'll release a section of flooring from here to here that lifts in one piece."
"Why don't we aim our bowguns at the two of ye—while ye do it?"
"Certainly, if you'll help us with these coffers ..."
The coffers were lifted aside, and hard-eyed guards crowded close to watch the merchants narrowly as the section of floor was freed and lifted aside—to reveal oiled cloth sacking sewn around large, thin somethings.
"Stand back now," Voldovan ordered, and then waved two of his men wordlessly forward. The guards probed the bundles with their daggers, cautiously lifted one bundle with the words, "Feels like armor plate," and slit its stitches, only to draw out—-a blued, curving sheet of armor plate.
"Looks like barding," the caravan master said slowly, and then raised his gaze to meet that of Sabran. "Well?"
"Peytrals—twenty-two identical plates."
"What are peytrals?" Narm muttered. Shandril chose that moment to look at the two merchants and discovered both of them staring at her restlessly, almost quivering with—fear? Anticipation? Eagerness to do something?

"Horsebreast armor, lad," Voldovan said absently, watching one of his men bend down with a lantern and peer into the hole, seeking to see what was under the rest of the false floor.
"Looks to be all the same stuff, Master," the guard called, after long moments of twisting and peering.
"Any enchantments on them?" Orthil asked the weaver,
who shook his head. Voldovan turned without pause to Narm and asked, "Is he telling the truth?"
Narm swallowed, doffed his helm, and handed it to—Voldovan, who snatched it with a curt shake of his head as Narm was handing it to Shandril. The caravan master gestured to her to keep aside from Narm and watch the two merchants. She nodded and did as she was bid.
The young mage frowned, raised his hands, and cast a careful detection spell Jhessail had taught him, a variant of the common magic that could see linked castings and layers of magic ... even where one had been cast to conceal another.
The furrier—Mhegras of Esmeltaran—seemed to sneer slightly at Narm's spellweaving. Shandril regarded him thoughtfully; a mage, perhaps?
"N-no," Narm said slowly. "No magic on any of the goods here, that I can see." He raised his head and gave Mhegras an apparently casual glance that made the Master-of-Furs stiffen as if he'd been insulted, then turned to Voldovan and shook his head. "Nothing,"
Without pause or change of expression the caravan master asked Sabran, "The new arms tax?"
The weaver nodded, and Voldovan waved at his men to restore the floor and the coffers. "Make ready to roll in all haste," he snapped. He strode to the wagon-flaps and there turned to glare at the two merchants, adding, "A word of advice: keep no secrets from any roadmaster. 'Tis a good way to get yerselves left behind in the wilderness without yer wagons and wealth, left to walk to the next town—if the

wolves let ye."
Collecting Narm and Shandril with a jerk of his head, he went out. In a few grunting moments, the guards finished heaving and stowing, and followed. From outside the wagon came shouted orders, the crack of drovers' whips, and the rumblings of wagon wheels reluctantly gathering speed.
Sabran and Mhegras eyed each other coldly, then said, more or less at the same moment, "Well? Why didn't you strike at them?"
Narm and Shandril had been standing only paces away in the confined space of their wagon, with no barrier nor body between to stop magic from cutting them down—and neither weaver nor furrier had lifted a finger. The two younglings had departed unscathed.
"Now was not the right time for anything but slaying," Sabran said coldly, "and whilst a possibility of capture remains, we must strive for that greater goal."
"You were afraid," Mhegras sneered. "Capture, my left rump-cheek!"
"Oh, say you so?" the priest of Bane replied cuttingly, extending his calm and steady hand. "Just whose fingers are trembling, wildtongue?"
Mhegras stared down at his own hand . . . and discovered, to his horror, that it was anything but steady. Rage rose in him like fast-kindled flame but died when he lifted his furious gaze and met Sabran's cold and waiting eyes. A faint glow of already risen magic was dancing in the priest's palm.
The wagons were thundering along at a speed that set them rocking and bouncing at every rut and pothole on the road—and there were a lot of ruts and potholes on the Trade Way. Narbuth's arms grew so numbed that Narm and Shandril took turns relieving him as the ready-wagon crashed and rattled on, rocks and trees racing by at breakneck speed.
"The horses won't be able to manage this for much longer!" Narm shouted in Shandril's ear, as the wagon rushed down into a little rivulet that ran across the road,

reins and harness momentarily curling and whipping about crazily. The wheels slipped and slid, the horses dug in, and the harness stretched singing-tight as the four snorting beasts hauled on up the next slope.

"Tell Voldovan that, not me!" Shan cried back, as they crested a ridge and saw a dozen more ridges beyond, the ribbon of road climbing over each in succession. A distant dust cloud told of travelers—probably wagons—coming south, but the Way had largely been theirs alone thus far this day. This was not a good sign, Narm and Shandril had gathered, from the expressions and muttered comments of the veteran guards and merchants.

As the view stretched out before them and the wagon started to gain speed in what was sure to become a breakneck plunge down the ridgeside, an even less auspicious sign made itself apparent: long, dark crossbow quarrels—the heavy war-bolts that could take down horses as readily as men—snarled and hummed out of the greenery on both sides of the road. Narm took Shandril by the shoulders and flung her through the top-flap, back into the wagon, cursing as a quarrel sliced through his leathers, laying his back bare.

" 'Slike being slapped with a burning brand," he gasped, falling into the rocking darkness atop Shandril. One of their horses promptly screamed.

"Gods!" the young mage spat, trying to turn. Shandril looked past him—in time to see Narbuth take a quarrel in the face. The drover's head exploded in a burst of blood and brains ere the force of the striking shaft snatched him off the wagon, out of sight.

Shandril's mouth tightened as she dragged Narm down to the floorboards, which promptly rapped them both hard on their chins as the wagon bounded over a particularly large pothole. "I can't burn down every tree between here and Waterdeep," she snapped, "and I don't dare try. Every time I call on my fire 'tis stronger, wilder . . . harder to control.

Narm, what are we going to do?"
Her husband gave her a helpless smile. "Well," he said brightly, "uh . . ."
As so often happens to those who dally, Faerun decided things for them. There was a sudden chaos of meaty, wagon-shaking thuds, a horrible wet spraying sound, and their wagon suddenly tilted.
Shan wrapped herself around Narm with a little scream as the world turned upside down several times.
Wood was shrieking and splintering all around them as a lot of heavy things wreathed in scratchy hay fell on them, one after another, and the wagon rolled. The boards of the walls and floor shuddered, bulged, buckled, and twisted. There was a deafening crash that sent things flying or tumbling all over the shattered wagon, another unearthly scream . . . and silence.
Silence soon filled by shouts and wagon rumblings and more screams, punctuated by the hissing and humming of crossbow bolts very close by. Narm muttered something wordless and tried to shift himself from under his lady and seemingly dozens of coffers and haybales and other unidentified but sharp items.
Shandril clutched at him and hissed, "Lie still. For now we play dead and wait. Let someone else be hero—and crossbow target—for a change."
Narm opened his mouth to protest, stared into her fierce gaze, and nodded.
There were more loud and ground-shaking crashes. Drovers were dragged past spewing steady streams of heartfelt curses ere the rumblings of moving wagons died away. Voldovan's caravan was coming to a halt—right in the closing jaws of whichever wolves were firing all of those crossbows from the trees.
Narm heaved, trying to move from under something that was numbing his left leg. "Lie still!" Shandril snarled into his ear.

"Then get that chest or whatever it is off my foot," her husband snarled right back at her. "I'm all wet down that leg, too. Am I bleeding?"

Shan shifted atop him, twisting around, and he felt her hands running gently along his leg, exploring ...

Someone crashed through branches and rustling leaves very close by, someone else followed, breathing heavily, and from farther off came the clang of sword on sword—fast, furious hacking that soon ended with a despairing cry and gurgling sounds.

The hum and zip of crossbow bolts slackened, and the crashings of running feet and singing of swords upon swords swiftly rose to an everpresent din on all sides of the upturned ready-wagon.

Narm felt the heavy thing pinning his ankle thrust aside and quickly pulled his foot away. Shandril crawled back up him again in the tumbled gloom, and murmured into his chest, "Just water. A cask split—'tis all wet, back there."

"What if someone puts a torch to all of this? We've got to—"

"We've got to lie still, love lord of mine. If flames do come, I can pull them into me and so both quench them and warm my spellfire. We're in what passes for a ditch, and by the sounds of it there are plenty of other crashed wagons. Now, quiet. We're dead, remember?"

"You make it hard to bear in mind," Narm told her with a smile, as Shan wormed her way into his arms and made herself comfortable. They lay together and listened to the sounds of men dying all around them.

"Whose wagon's this?" an unfamiliar voice gasped suddenly, startlingly close.

"Voldovan's—one of his ready-wagons. Hmmph! I guess the fire-witch wasn't such a world-searing menace after all."

'This was hers? Gods! Thender told us half Faerun is after her!"

"Not any more. Not unless they're the sort of crazed robe-wearers who hunt folk down after they're dead, to twist them

into unlife to menace us all for an extra lingering lifetime or two! There's Voldovan—see? All the bolts'll be flying his way, now. Come on! Back to ..."
The voice faded so swiftly that the sounds of frantically sprinting men drowned out the rest of the words.
Narm and Shandril had scarcely relaxed and started to breathe normally again when someone else, breathing hard, ran up and more or less fell into the far end of the wagon, where the chests and casks were tumbled into a wall of splintered, riven confusion. Someone else arrived almost on top of the hard-breathing man—who growled out an angry curse.
"Bones of the dead, Brasker, don't do that! I almost cut my hand off getting this blade around at you, to say nothing of what I would've done to you if I'd managed it!"
"Stop your whining," a heavier voice replied sourly. "They're putting quarrels through everything that moves out there .. . and in case you've failed to notice, those're the big ones! Hit by one of those, and you'll be greeting the gods straightaway, not lying around cursing that this wagon's somehow yours. As I recall, this was the one the spellfire wench was riding."
"Have you seen her, since this—?"
"No, and if one of those blackswords have killed her on us, Gorthrimmon's going to be less than pleased. Take her alive, he said, at all costs."
"What does the Cult want with one slip of a lass, anyway? So she knows a fire spell or two. Haven't we got mages enough already to fight Luskan to a standstill or scour out Darkhold if they're ever foolish enough to want to die screaming in spell-battle?"
"This spellfire, Holvan, is something special. It can cleave spells so fast it wipes the sneer off an archmage's face and makes him tremble! Whoever grabs it'll be able to slaughter the Red Wizards himself, chase the Blackstaff into hiding, and melt down old Elminster and the Seven Sisters, too!"

"Gods above," Holvan whispered. "So they expect us to take her?"
"No, they expect us to die trying—along with the other Followers we don't know about, who're also along on this caravan. As I see it, we'll do best to find out who the Zhents have sent along in these wagons and slit a few throats without getting caught at it! 'Tis going to end in spell-battle, see if it doesn't, and the fewer competitors around to hamper us of the Cult in taking her down, the better! I hear a Cult wizard called Lharass has found some ancient spell or other that can chain mages with their own magic! I wonder if this Shandril can be held by chains of her own spellfire?"
"I like the sound of this less and less," Holvan muttered. "Whatever happened to putting daggers in merchants' backs and taking their coins to the nearest Lord of the Cult, for him to gather and present to some dread wyrm, while we trot safely off and find us some more merchants?"
"The world changed, Holvan. It always does. I prefer the old simple ways, too, but somehow the rulers and flying wizards of the Realms forgot to ask my opinion. They always do."
"The bolts've stopped, Brasker; should we—?"
"Bide just a bit. I'd be less than pleased to offer myself as the only target still standing, if they're just lying low .. . no, there's Voldovan coming back, and he's talking to that fool Nargalarr, the pot-seller. It must be over. Back to our wagon!"
"Shouldn't we—?"
"No! Brigands love to fall back and wait for everyone to get into the road and start tramping around talking about their great valor and who got away from them—then rake
all the chattering heroes with another volley. So we run fast and low from wagon to wagon back to our own, and nowhere else! If one of the guard wants to talk, he can do it running after us! Come on!"
There was a brief scrambling, a thud of boots, then relative calm.

"Brasker and Holvan," Shandril murmured. "Remember those names."
"Done, love," Narm whispered. "I'm beginning to think every third merchant in this caravan is after us!"
Whatever reply Shandril might have made was lost in a sudden cacophony of shouts, screams, humming bolts, and the thudding of running feet—followed swiftly by a deafening chorus of clanging, singing steel. Brasker, it seemed, had been right. They heard Voldovan roaring something, and—
"In here!" someone hissed, and coffers were flung aside in the upturned chaos of the wagon. "Hurry!"
A chest fell heavily, an already riven cask groaned, and suddenly the tangle of coffers at Narm's feet were thrust aside, and a face peered in at them. A stranger's face with a drawn and bloody sword beside it, and another unfamiliar face at its shoulder. "This'll do," one of the men said, not yet seeing the young couple lying motionless ahead of his boots. "There's space enough to hide back here. We can—ho!"
The brigand's blade drew back as he saw Narm and Shandril, ready to stab—and his companion shouldered aside an untidy heap of coffers, and joined him in staring.
"Well, well, two lovebirds," the first brigand said in delight, as his blade swept down. "Greet you the gods together!"
Narm raised a hand to cast a hasty spell—but Shandril's spellfire was swifter. The man's blade melted to nothing ere it could touch them, and his head followed, leaving a wavering, headless thing of ashes. Wide-eyed, the second brigand hacked desperately at the deadly lass lying at his feet, blade flashing down . ..
"Sar tha," Narm said crisply, his fingers spread. Magic roared out of him in a fistlike thrust of force that smashed brigands, coffers, wagonboards and all before it, so that there was suddenly nothing but air beyond their feet.
Air filled with the broken, tumbling fragments of coffers and

blades and brigands.
Narm and Shandril sprang up together and ran to the opening Narm's magic had smashed through the end of the wagon ... in time to see the debris he'd sent flying bounce, tumble, and roll to various small halts on a scarred road.
Right beside a pair of worn and rather familiar boots. Boots that were still on the widely planted feet of—yes— Orthil Voldovan, who stood with his hands on his hips. He held a bloody sword in both of those hands, and a grim and ragged group of guards had gathered behind his shoulders.
He looked at the young couple standing in the shattered end of the wagon, and they looked back at him, wisps of spell-fire still licking up like tiny flames from Shandril's fingers.
"Well met," the caravan master said sarcastically. "I was wondering where ye'd gotten to. In case ye haven't noticed, we're fighting a small war out here!"
Shandril stared at him, then down at something writhing and flopping on the ground behind one of the guards. Peering at it, she strode out of the ruined wagon and right past Voldovan, never even noticing the hard look he gave her, nor his slow pivot on one boot heel to give her the full weight of his glaring disapproval as she hastened past. Narm trotted after her, trying an apologetic smile on Master Orthil. It was ignored.
The flopping thing proved to be Beldimarr, half-sitting on the road with crossbow quarrels standing out of his left arm and leg. The latter wouldn't hold him, and he was
dragging himself along on knuckles and knees, his left arm pinned to his side by the heavy warbolt, with dark red blood streaming down over his battered armor. In one hand was clenched his belt flask, and in the other, a dagger. He was trying to get to Arauntar.
Shandril got there first, but she might as well not have existed as far as the two grizzled old guards were concerned.
"Our pact," Arauntar gasped, foaming blood running from his mouth with each word. "Keep it!"

The senior guard resembled a gigantic, copiously bleeding hedgehog. He lay groaning in the road-mud in a small lake of his own blood, transfixed by almost a dozen crossbow quarrels. All he seemed able to move were the trembling fingers of one hand, and his head. He glared at Shandril as she knelt between him and the struggling Beldimarr, and gasped, "Get back! Gods damn you, lass!"

"What pact?" Shandril snapped. "What're you doing, Beldimarr?"

The guards drew in close around her, and one reached down a hand to her shoulder to pluck her back—but Narm caught that reaching arm, shaking his head . . . and with a look of faint surprise at himself for doing so, the guard drew his hand back.

Beldimarr gave Shandril a glare every bit as furious as Arauntar's, and snarled, "What we all do in this trade, lass. As agreed aforetime between us, I'll give my friend a last pleasure—" he lifted the flask as far as he could, and then came down on that hand again with a grunt of pain "—an' then send him beyond pain, to the gods!" He lifted his dagger. "Now get out o' the way! He's died for you, lass. Now, let him go!" ;

"No!" Shandril snapped. "Narm, Voldovan, keep everyone back!"

"What?" the caravan master growled. "What crazed—" ,

"Do it," Narm said quietly. "Trust her. I'm alive now because she did this for me."

The guards threw him startled looks, and more than one pair of eyes swiftly narrowed. "Is this some sort of fire-witch magic?" one of them snapped.

Shandril looked up. "Yes! Please watch, but do nothing to , stay me—and perhaps I'll be nigh the next time, when you need it!"

In the startled silence that followed her words the maid of Highmoon looked from Beldimarr to Arauntar and back again and murmured, "Please, both of you, trust me."

Beldimarr shrugged and jerked his head toward his stricken friend. Shandril turned to the dying Harper and asked, "Arauntar, do you want to live?"
"Not in this much pain," he snarled back, and then groaned out a huge gout of blood and whimpered, " 'Course I do!"
"Beldimarr, Voldovan," Shandril snapped, "lift him a little off the ground, as gently as you can. I need to get under him."
"Under—?" Trading doubtful looks, the two men gingerly laid hold of Arauntar's armpits and ribs, reaching awkwardly around the many quarrels, and then shifted him a hands-breadth into the air.
The guard roared with pain, a cry that collapsed into sobbing as Shandril threw herself down into the blood, on her back, and wormed her way under Arauntar as if she was a lover embracing him. "Right," she gasped, struggling for breath. "Let him down, and let go of him. Now, get back!" -

SOME STRANGE SORT OF SWORD

Some of us fight with swords, and some with nimble tongues or poison or coins. Oh, aye, and some of us blast Faerun around us with spells, or call down dragons, or set roofs afire. When you think right down through things, we're all just shaping different sorts of swords to cut our ways through life. Some measure success by the amount of blood they leave as their trail—and some by how little they manage to spill.

Elvryn Auraunt, Sage of Everlund
Sword of Ink, Boots of Fancy: A Sage's Tale
Year of the Stag

Narm reached in quickly as the groaning guard was let back down and wiped Arauntar's lips with his pouch-kerchief. The cloth came away dark and dripping with blood.
Wary, unhappy murmurs arose from the gathered, watching men. Shandril put her lips to Arauntar's.
Well, now, Beldimarr growled, wincing his way to a sitting position. "That beats a gulletful of Old Ironfire any day." He looked to Narm. "This some sort o' ritual? She's not stealing

his soul ere he dies, is she?"
"Watch," Narm said tensely, "and don't interfere. Any of you."
As the last word left his mouth, a louder murmur arose from the guards: anger warring with worry. Spellfire was flaring around Shandril's mouth and hands—hands that ran slowly up and down Arauntar's arms and torso, as far as she could reach, as the glow of magical fire grew stronger and brighter.
Arauntar stiffened and groaned, his arms shuddering and his hands clenching into claws . . . and Beldimarr frowned and raised his dagger uncertainly.
Spellfire suddenly flared blinding-bright around the two bodies lying in the road, and Arauntar convulsed and screamed, throwing his head back and wallowing atop the raging fire that was Shandril as if he was trying to claw his way out of a hearthfire.
There were growls and curses from the watching men, and despite Narm's fiercely raised hands they strode or leaned forward, many hands going to swordhilts.
Arauntar fell silent and slumped down into the flames, and the mutters of anger grew—only to fall away into gasps of awe as the smoking crossbow quarrels standing up out of him suddenly caught fire, blazed up into flames, and were gone ... in the space of a mere breath.
Abruptly the brilliance was gone, and the flames with it. Smoke curled away in strangely spicy wisps, and the tensely watching men could see Arauntar's scorched and blackened body lying still atop a white-faced Shandril. The mud around them was blackened and burned flat, and the maid of High-moon was smeared and streaked with ashes. She moved a hand, weakly feeling the ground with her fingertips, then struggled to get out irom unuer uit guam. ^.o ^m, x*.^-,^^, they saw she now wore only ashes that had once been leather and buckles and armor plates.
Narm bent to help her up but was shouldered roughly aside by Beldimarr. Shandril coughed, got herself to where she

could crawl on hands and knees, swiped a filthy tangle of hair out of her eyes—and froze.
The point of Beldimarr's knife was glittering under her nose.
"What have you done to him, wench?" he growled menacingly.
Shandril slapped the dagger aside in exasperation and embraced the wounded Harper in an awkward hug. Beldimarr hissed with pain as one of her hands brushed the quarrel in his arm, and fell over on his side, with Shandril atop him.
"You don't make it easy, you great hairy hulks," she said, wincing, as spellfire flared again along her back and behind and legs.
"She's killing him!" a guard roared, his blade flashing out with frightening speed. Narm threw himself into the man and sent him stumbling aside before that steel could find Shandril's flesh. They were still staggering and grappling together when a faint, rasping voice made the guard freeze and brought silence to the ring of watching men once more.
"Gods be praised for sending you, lass," Arauntar said hoarsely, sitting up slowly and feeling his ribs. He flexed his fingers in wonder and touched himself here and there where warbolts had driven into him and were now gone.
Shaking his head, he looked up at the ring of intent faces and said, "I ache, all over, as if I've been beaten. My fingers feel . . . burned. The rest of me—fine. Whole, all my wounds gone." He sprang up suddenly, and great shreds of scorched armor fell away from him, crumbling into ash and tiny smokes. Standing half-naked in the ring _ of guards, Arauntar threw out his hands—causing most
_ -i i-f-i _
of the rest of his armor to fall away—and laughed. "I'm healed! Healed!"
"A miracle!" one of the guards gasped, and suddenly everyone was silent again, staring at Beldimarr and the naked lass squirming atop him, her limbs almost hidden

from view in bright, rising flames.
Orthil Voldovan gave Narm a look of new respect, and muttered, "And ye sleep with that? Yer skin must be nigh stone!"
Narm was too busy rubbing his bruises and giving the guard he'd tussled with pats of silent, mutual thanks and apologies to do more than grin.
Again spellfire flared blinding-bright, the crossbow quarrels blazed up into nothingness, and a man roared in pain. This one, however, wasn't as sorely wounded as Arauntar had been, and lay beneath the searing healer and so was able to involuntarily thrust Shandril up and away, as a parent holds a child aloft.
She stared down at him, hair stirring around her as if it, too, was made of flame. Sparks leaked from her eyes, and tiny tongues of flame gouted from her mouth as she looked down at him and gasped, "Beldimarr, don't you want to be healed?"
"Gods, yes, lass, but it hurts!"
"Oh, you've noticed," she replied weakly, causing Arauntar to chuckle. "Let me down, Bel," she pleaded, "and hurry. I can't—I can't—"
The light in her eyes fled, and she went limp. Hastily Beldimarr clasped her tightly to him, embracing her tightly as spellfire flared one last time around them ... and died away.
Beldimarr grunted in amazement and cradled the nude woman in his arms as carefully as he might hold a precious thing made of glass as he slowly got himself to a sitting position.
Narm knelt to help, biting his lip. Shan was asleep or senseless, her head lolling limply. He looked up and around at Voldovan and all of his guards and said almost pleadingly, "You see, I hope, that this isn't something endless, or easy. Don't all get wounded unto death and expect to be healed at once, now!"

At the sound of his voice Shandril shook herself, as if coming out of an unpleasant dream, and then blinked, saw Narm, and kissed him.

There were chuckles from the guards around, and even a faint cheer, as Nairn's and Shandril's arms tightened around each other.

After a long, blissful moment, the maid of Highmoon drew back her head to look anxiously at Beldimarr and then at Arauntar—and saw smiling thanks and awe on both guards' faces. Then her eyes flickered as she remembered the ring of watching men.

Rather than blushing or trying to hide herself in Narm's embrace, she looked up at them, directly at face after face, then asked, "What? Why d'you all stare at me so?"

" 'Tis like something of the gods," a guard said hoarsely. "I know not whether to worship ye, Lady—or sword ye, to save us all."

"Why? Do you pray to Arauntar, or try to cut him up, because he swings a good sword? Do you hack at a cobbler, or go on your knees to him, because he mends a boot you thought couldn't be mended, and makes it look as new? Or so treat a master archer? This is but a skill the gods gave me. Why such awe over it?"

"Lady," another guard said slowly," 'tis magic."

There was a murmur of agreement, but Voldovan rubbed his chin and said firmly, "The lass has the right of it! The best way to see spellfire is as some strange sort of sword that can slay or heal." Then he raised his voice gruffly. "Right! Show's over! We're not getting any nearer Orcskull Rise, standing here watching a little fire and a lass rolling around losing her clothes in it! Let's move, men!"

Amid the general groan and stir that followed, the caravan master added slowly, "Oh, and Lady, too." He raised his hand in a sort of salute, and said almost grudgingly, "I'll not soon be forgetting this day."

Shandril stood up, hands on hips, and wrinkled her nose at

him. ''I'm not wearing armor again."
Voldovan grinned, shook his head, and growled in mock rage, "Defying me again1? Some loyal guard ye are!"
"Master!" a guard called ere Shandril could reply, dragging a body by the boots toward Voldovan and trying hard not to look as if he was staring at the unclad fire-wench at every third step. "You should see this! By how we found him, he seems to have been warlord of this . . . the attack on us. Look familiar?"
The caravan master strode forward almost defiantly to glare down at the corpse.
"Bluthlock," he snarled. "Rendilar Bluthlock of Scornubel, scourer of alleys . . . and hurler of—" he waved a hand around at the ruined wagons, crossbow quarrels, blood puddles, dead horses, and sprawled men—"shakes and rats and mad dogs at all the rest of us. Well, that's one Scornubrian no one will mourn, least of all me."
Voldovan spat onto the slack, staring face of the corpse, then turned and stalked away, snapping, "Salvage all the wagons we can, reload, and let's be going! To me, all!"
The guards obediently trotted toward the caravan master from all directions, Narm and Shandril among them.
Orthil Voldovan looked around the ring of reassembled faces with a sour expression on his face, caught sight of his fearful surviving clients drawing nearer, and lowered his voice to a mutter.
"This run really is cursed. I want strict, leap-to-me obedience and alertness every instant ye're awake. Don't hesitate, don't argue my orders, and don't do anything stupid." He looked
grimly around at them and added. "I know ye've heard this a time or thousandscore before, but I mean it. If we slip up again, with this few of us left and hounds coming at us from behind every tree, it's likely well never reach Waterdeep—or anywhere else, ever again—alive."
"Korthauvar, I don't want to be blasted to cinders by

Drauthtar or anyone else," Hlael said angrily, "or forced into some helpless beast-shape to be maimed and left to be devoured, either! We must do something to snatch this spellfire, not just watch and gloat! What if someone else gets to her first, and—"
"Let them. I want them to."
"You what?" Hlael almost screamed.
"Let someone who's not the two of us snatch spellfire and be pounced upon by someone else. We watch and wait as all the hounds on this trail snarl and snap at each other ... and when we're at the last hound, or almost so and the best opportunity presents itself, then we make our own little pounce."
"While Drauthtar does what, awaiting our reports?" Hlael snapped.
"Considers our strategy as clever as every last mage of the Zhentarim should be," Korthauvar said firmly. "Why fight someone and reveal yourself as a foe, thereafter to stand in danger when you can get your enemy to do what you want him to, by manipulating this and hinting that? All of these young, ambitious fools seem to think that striding out to hurl spells up Elminster's nose is how you show your power. All that does is show you a welcoming grave—and your own stupidity in the few seconds it takes you to reach it. Why do the swordheads always judge we who work
magic by how many towers we can topple? Why do they never appreciate how we can make a gentle suggestion and have an entire village leap to our bidding for fear of what we might do?"
"Old Kaummorth's 'smile and walk softly and be greatly feared' speech," Hlael said wearily. "I remember it, too, Korthauvar. I only hope Drauthtar took those same teachings, and thought as highly of Kaummorth as you do."
"I'd rather be alive to face his fury than dead by spellfire or at the hands of these vultures falling all over each other right now to get at Shandril Shessair," Korthauvar replied.

"Now find me that mindriding spell! We need more eyes in that caravan than the paltry pair we have already. Some of the Cult swordheads and even ambition-blinded mages of our own Brotherhood along on that run are likely to slaughter anyone who stands in their path. There're others along, too: that blandreth-dealer, for one, isn't the same man who was in that wagon earlier! 'Twould not do to have a lone view of all the tumult and lose it at some crucial moment."

"No," Hlael Toraunt said thoughtfully, eyeing Korthauvar. "No, 'twould not do at all."

"A small step shy of thievery," Thoadrin growled, almost perfunctorily. In truth, the price was about what he'd expected: five times what would be asked in a back room in Dock Ward and about thrice what quarrels could be had for in Scornubel or in most places where competition wasn't fierce, The supply was better than he'd hoped for, too: twice the crossbow bolts they'd set out with, in full score-and-one quivers. Four quivers each, if he bought them all.

"Acceptable," he added. "We'll take them all."

"All?" the trader echoed, his surprise too strong to leave his customary stoneface intact. "Waukeen praise you, warrior!"

"Ah, but she does," Thoadrin grunted, with a minimum of enthusiasm, "and the tax collector conies trotting right behind her gifts, with his hand out to fondle my purse and more!"

The trader chuckled politely, signaled with one finger— and his assistants took up a quiver each and held them out to the nearest of Thoadrin's men.

The Cult warrior shook his gauntlet off his hand and drew forth the leather snake of coins from along his forearm, under the armor. He let its river of gold spill into the trader's bowl and had the satisfaction of seeing the trader shake his head and murmur, "Waukeen does smile upon you, lord."

"True enough," Thoadrin agreed, noting—without appearing to look—his men checking the quivers they received by

drawing random bolts forth, ere settling them in saddlebags and on baldrics. "Yet other gods call on me all too often and interrupt the time I'd fain spend with the Lady of All Coins." He nodded as the last coin fell into the bowl, then plucked another from a slit in his swordbelt and tossed it in, too. "Mention me to her in your prayers," he said, turning his horse away.

"I shall," the merchant said, as they exchanged nods of respect. "What name shall I tell her?"

Thoadrin smiled. "She knows me well. Just say, 'the dragonbone fool on the horse' and she'll know."

The trader frowned. "Dragonbone?"

The warrior shrugged. "Paerun holds a lot of fools on horses. A word to make me stand out."

As he spurred away from Dowan Pool with his men riding at his heels, trailing the easy laughter of men laden with food, heavily armed, and eager to launch their next attack, Thoadrin murmured aloud the same unfortunate saving that the trader was probably mouthing about now, too: "One fate befalls fools who stand out."

Marlel smiled softly as he peered out of his wagon-flap. The man with the heavy coffer was just setting it down behind Narm Tamaraith.

The spellfire-lass mattered, but her lad did not. Of course, if this clumsy hireling—of Thay, if he had his rogues right—succeeded, the Dark Blade of Doom would have to move swiftly. Even the stupidest Zhent could figure out that a lone, grieving lass would have to sleep sometime....

The Thayan turned and rose from the coffer in a single smooth movement, the knife in his hand a soot-blackened, unglinting fang that he drove viciously up—

Into empty air, as Narm spun away from him, kicking the back of the man's knee. As the Thayan stumbled, Narm's own knife flashed out and found a home in the man's left eye.

As the Thayan fell, Marlel saw all the color drain out of the

young lad's face. Narm promptly threw up all over the corpse.
Marlel leaned forward for a better look and hastily ducked back from the flap as one of Voldovan's veteran dogs—Beldimarr—came hastening to Narm, casting a look in Marlel's direction as he did so.
The man who was not Haransau Olimer cradled a cold belt-flask of thrusk—brewed this morning, and doubtless as bitter as a winter storm by now—and smiled in the dimness.
So the young lad had grown claws, had he? A pity he was trapped facing a small forest of wise and deadly fangs.
Four of them, magic leaping between their blades like blue fire as they charged her. Sharantyr bit her lip. This was going to hurt. Ironguard spells stopped metal, not magic.
The one protecting her now was the variant that left her hands solid to metal, so she could wield her own blade but could also lose fingers or swordhand to hostile steel.
Two foes coming straight at her, the other two circling wide to her flanks ... now!
She'd taken a wary step or two back, shifted her sword to point at one rushing brigand, then another, and put an expression of fear onto her face. Now, without any warning, she burst into a sprinting run, right at the gap between the man running to her right and the two coming head-on.
She was tired. She'd have to end this quickly or have it ended for her. Despite her weariness, she was faster than any of these lumbering men, and one of them stumbled as he tried to turn too swiftly and almost pitched over on his side. Cursing and hopping on a turned ankle, he was far behind her, and she'd timed her move perfectly.
A blade reached for her, slid past her shoulder as she leaned gracefully away from it. She passed the right-most of the two straight-ahead chargers and made her own leap to the left. She landed, spun, and leaped again, turning more quickly than any runner could, and found herself right behind the leader. He was whirling—straight into her blade as it swung

through his throat. He hadn't even time for a shout as he choked, looked startled, and toppled, still swinging himself hard around.

Sharantyr took the man who'd been running beside him next, the man she'd outflanked. He was still turning to follow her runs and leaps, with his back to her, and slaughtering him was hideously easy. Throat again, from behind as he turned into it, then a leap away to face the nearest surviving brigand, the flanker who hadn't hurt his ankle.

His sneering smile was gone, replaced by anger and rising fear, as the lady ranger of the Knights of Myth Drannor—a title given her by folk of Shadowdale to distinguish her from Florin, who was the closest thing the Knights had to a leader; gods how she missed his easy smile and swift blade beside her now!—ran right at him, charging hard to stay ahead of the last, hobbling brigand.

Their blades met, and she had to duck away and leap straight up to quell her momentum, so as to cross blades with him when she was properly balanced. This man was good. There'd be no fooling him with swift turns. She cast a glance at the other brigand—Mielikki damn him, he was close!—and came down charging at another foe. Best swing around him to put the stumbler between her and his blade-master fellow, and—

They were both fast. She caught the stumbler's blade on her own, but the other blade thrust hard into her from behind. It passed through her as if through smoke, of course, but blue fire arced from sword to sword—and the tip of one of them was protruding from her own belly, thrust through from behind.

The pain was like being plunged into a fire. Or rather, like having a fire burst from nothingness into instant full roaring inside her, blazing up through her ribs to choke her and leave her sobbing and trembling helplessly.

Through her whimpering agony Sharantyr heard both men swear in astonishment at her lack of blood and solidity—and

swing their swords again, that damned blue fire arcing and sizzling between the blades in hungry lines of blue sparks.
"Die, she-wolf!" one of the brigands snarled, as she circled desperately away from them. He lunged at her.
Good, that kept them both facing her, so she couldn't get caught between them and pinned or grappled. Which meant... if she could somehow stand more of this pain . . .
Yes! Sharantyr refrained from parrying the blade coming at her. Instead, she embraced it and ran along it, until his knuckles struck her belly. The agony of blue fire raging in her was almost too much to bear, but she kept hold of her blade somehow and slashed it across his face. He fell away with a snarl, his blade clawing numbingly down her legs to clang on the road stones beneath her boots. She kicked the wound she'd made, hard, as she sprang over him and into a whirling parry against the last brigand.
The swordmaster who was so swift and so good. Their blades met and sang, whirled, and sang again, and at every strike blue fire arced from his steel to the fallen blades of his fellows. She saw his intent in her foe's face even before he tried it. He wanted to snatch up the blade of the man she'd just blinded and catch her between the two blades, knowing the magic would hurt her where steel could not. She'd no time to sort through Lhaeo's bag for particular gems, or any other aid at all, and she lacked the strength and speed to stop this stratagem now.
So Sharantyr let him snatch up that second blade, by backing away and slashing out the throat of the one she'd wounded. "Three down," she panted aloud, trying to enrage or unsettle him, but the last brigand only smiled.
"So I'll have you all to myself," he said lightly, as he stepped forward with a sword in each hand and blue fire snarling silently between them, "to teach you true pain."
Sharantyr stepped away from him, taking care not to trip over any of the bodies. No, let him try to stalk her over them. "My," she replied more calmly than she felt, "that

should be fun."
"Oh, yes," he purred. "You'll find I'm a very good teacher. I ran my own school of the sword in Athkatla for twelve seasons."
"Until they caught you at something, I've no doubt," Sharantyr replied coolly, circling away from him again. His smile broadened. They both knew who was better with a blade and who was swifter and stronger—and it wasn't the lady ranger. Flamewind stamped and made a small sound of fear and irritation well behind the man, but he never so much as let his eyes flicker. Carefully he advanced, blades out and ready.
Something burned Sharantyr's foot, and she looked down and saw another brigand's blade, alight with blue fire. The swordmaster rushed at her, but she managed to snatch up the fallen blade before his swords could quite touch her, and flung it right at his face.
Gods, but he was fast! The Athkatlan's swords caught the spinning steel and struck it aside, so it only sliced a lock of hair from him as it whirled away—but blue fire burns brigands, too, and he cried out, blinded for a moment.
A moment was all Sharantyr needed. She took the sickening, searing pain of his blade through her breast and left side for the gasped breath that she needed to lean in and hack the side of his neck. He crumpled, clutching at the wound as blood flew, letting go his second sword and leaving bare his remaining swordhand all at once. Sharantyr chopped his blade out of his fingers, leaving him staggering back and staring at her in pain and dawning despair. "You teach well," she murmured. "Behold: true pain, as promised."
His hand darted down from his neck to where she'd known it would go, to snatch and throw a dagger. One of three, if her eyes had served her as they should ...
No, she was in no mood to taste three or even one dagger, just now. She threw her sword into his face and sent him reeling, dagger falling away harmlessly. She was on him like

a hunting cat pouncing, her stonemaiden out and around his throat before his body had finished bouncing. He struggled, but she stomped on both of his hands and then sat down hard on his head . . . and it was too late.

His face was purple and his eyes were staring their last when Sharantyr murmured almost gently, "Yes. 'Twould have been fun. Go now to Tempus, or whoever among the gods runs a better sword-school."

When the swordmaster's last breath had rattled out and his stare was frozen, she retrieved her weapons, wincing, and went back for Flamewind. The horse snorted at the smell of blood on her and pawed the road but did not run— for which Sharantyr was heartily grateful. She was too tired and too ravaged by pain to chase a horse through the Blackrocks just now.

Something bayed in the hills to the east, not far off. The lady ranger collected three glowing blades without peering to see what might be howling and caught up Flamewind's dangling reins. The ranger and the horse left the bodies behind without another glance and walked together down the road to Face Crag.

Sleek, shaggy things with long fangs snarled and slunk away from the wrack she found there, leaving gnawed bones in their wake. Fresh, bloody skulls lay shattered underfoot amid ruined wagons, dark bloodstains, and broken lances. There were rustlings in the trees on both sides of her as Sharantyr peered this way and that, seeking any sign of a certain young mage or his lady . . . and thankfully finding none.

Flamewind snorted at those sounds and danced restlessly at the end of his reins. She held him firmly, plucked up two fallen skins of water to lash at his saddle, then strode on along the road, day drawing down or not.

As they went, the rustling sounds kept them company. Sharantyr smiled mirthlessly and walked on, seeking death

or spellfire.
A popular.quest it seemed, these days.

MERE MEMORIES OF MAGES

I try not to remember dead wizards, and I write of them, as tersely as possible. Even the memory of some mages can be dangerous. Some have the power to awaken again when folk think or talk too vividly of them. Best be careful what tales of magic you tell around fires by night . . . or you may end up sharing your fire with unexpected guests.

Omnur Harlbraeth, Lord of Rolls and Records
A River of Gold: How I Served Bright Amn
Year of the Weeping Moon

Shandril stared around at all that could be seen in the flickering torchlight—bare rocks and the stunted branches of long-dead trees—and wrinkled her nose. "So this is Orcskull Rise," she murmured. "I can't see why all the fluster and hurry to reach it, myself."

Narm grinned at her and nodded at the Rise, a ridge of smooth bare stone that rose out of the ground like the back of some great sleek monster, to break off in a jagged face of stone overlooking the Trade Way. The old mining trail could be seen winding down out of the hills along its flank. Arauntar was already waving and yelling and pointing, getting wagons parked in a neat row along it.

"A defensible height, Voldovan said," he explained, watching guards moving around atop the knoll. It was smaller than Face Crag, but higher than the rockpiles around it.

"Hunh," Shandril grunted, swinging down from the perch to clip leading-reins to the bits of the lead horses. "A good place to catch arrows or flee from snarling jaws and fall screaming from, more like."

"You," Narm said with mock disapproval, "listened to too many minstrels at the Moon."

"I suppose so," Shandril agreed wearily. "Adventure was all I craved then—and they brought me adventure, in vivid handfuls I could thrill to beside a familiar fire."

"Regretting it all?" Narm asked softly, taking the rein she handed him, and walking with her toward the shouting windmill that was Arauntar.
"Not all," Shandril said with a smile, patting his shoulder and leaning close to brush against him as they walked. "Not all."
"'Don't fall over on me, fire-witch!" the grizzled guard roared at her, as if she hadn't snatched him back from choking, agonized death earlier or ever exchanged even a smile with him. "Get along here! I haven't got all night, ye know!"
"Earlier today you didn't, so much was sure," she murmured to herself, with a wry grin. "Do you mean me, Arauntar?" she called cheerfully. "Or have you a secret collection of fire-witches I don't know about? To warm your tent of nights, perhaps?"
The guard gave her a dark look, and growled, "That's not something to joke about, lass. I've been to Aglarond, ye know—and Rashemen."
"Have you now?" she replied softly, as she led their horses along his pointing arm. "I doubt I'll live to see either of those lands. Stop by our fire and tell me about them some night, if you've time and inclination. Please."
Arauntar gave her another hard look but made no reply.
Narm looked at Shandril anxiously as they helped to hobble the horses and unharness them, but she gave him a wordless smile and a kiss as if nothing was bothering her at all.
Which meant, Narm knew as he frowned his way to the creek to fetch water in the wagon's two old, battered buckets, that something was. Very much.
Thoadrin reined in and nodded to Laranthan to scout ahead, where their trail joined the Trade Way. Wordlessly his best warrior nodded, slipped from his saddle and handed his reins to Thoadrin.
In a few very quiet moments Laranthan was leading four men forward in the moonlight like eager shadows, down to where the rocks gave way to the countless wagon ruts.

Thoadrin drew his night-blade—daubed with dull brown stain to keep it from flashing any betraying reflection—laid it across his high saddlehorn, and smiled approvingly at Laranthan's stealthy search. It had been a hard, sore ride from the Two Pools, but it had been worth it. They were well armed again and ahead of the spellfire wench, with time in hand to rest.

The Trade Way looked deserted, with nary a campfire in sight. Barring lurking beasts—and there were always lurking beasts; the trick was to know the deadly and ignore the rest—he'd have plenty of time to ready an attack.

Orthil Voldovan's caravan should reach this spot as the sun was sinking low on the morrow. They'd be tired and in haste to reach Haelhollow, a good way north on up the road, to make camp.

Thoadrin smiled. There'd be no need for blades yet, only bows from amid the rocks. With so many bolts to loose, they could fire freely. Voldovan just might find himself in the Hollow with nary a guard left to fend off night-wolves.

And darkness was the favorite fighting-time of Laranthan and most of the other bold warriors of the Cult.

Ah, but the wolves were bad this year.

Mirt the Moneylender sat back in his chair, hooked his thumbs into the pocket-slits of what could .only be honestly described as his bulging waistcoat, and let out a gusty sigh.

"Paraster, Paraster," he rumbled, "what am I going to do with ye?"

The man sitting across the littered desk from him smiled coldy, lifted his shoulders in the slightest of shrugs, and said, "Nothing. There's nothing you can do."

"Aye, aye, I see the spark and sizzle of thy jaunty little shielding," Mirt said with a wave of one dismissive little finger. "Feeble things to trust in, I feel 'tis only fair to remind ye." He waved a pudgy and graying-haired hand around at the walls of his office and added sadly, "Ye stand—sorry, sit—within my power now, merchant. My magics can

overwhelm ye ... and if it comes to such open unpleasantness as drawn steel, why—I fear / can overwhelm ye."
"You?" The wine-importer sneered in open incredulity. "With your breath or mountainous fat perhaps, Old Wolf, but I hardly think—"
"Aye, ye've hit upon it, Paraster: Ye hardly think." The moneylender drew himself up behind his desk like a ponderously patient whale, folded his hands together—Paraster Montheir stared at them, having never quite noticed before how age-spotted they'd become, and laced with surface-standing green veins—and added mildly, "Rather than court the drastic violence ye allude to, let us do that very thing: think."
Mirt unfolded his hands, regarded the nails of one of them critically, and continued, "Think of my position: a respected, long-established merchant of Waterdeep, bound close by the laws and taxes and practices of this my chosen city, perhaps the greatest trading center yet known in Faerun, a place justly called the City of Splend—"
"Yes, yes," the Athkatlan across the table said testily, "spare me the grand local pride. My city makes similar claims, remember, and the great ports of Calimshan sneer at the both of us, as does Tharsult, and . . . ne'er mind."
"Well enough," Mirt agreed mildly. "Setting aside Waterdeep's prominence or lack of same, grant me so much: that it is an important trading center, ye and I both sit in it right now, and by trading custom recognized among honest merchants across these Realms of ours, we are thus bound by its local rules."
Finishing his inspection of his nails, the Old Wolf lifted his gaze suddenly and disconcertingly to the Athkatlan's face and added, ''Wherefore, as a moneylender of standing within these city walls, I offend against all my fellow coin-traders and further, against all merchants who trade in anything, if I let ye break a bond and debt to me without

penalty. If one may with impunity avoid solemnly contracted obligations and yet still trade within Waterdeep, flouting its laws with every coin spun while thy debt remains unpaid, then no merchant is safe, nor any honest citizen buying a radish, nor the city tax coffers, nor the—"

"Much wind, old man, yet I stand unmoved," Paraster sneered. "We both know that merchants claim to follow all laws and regulations, and yet they swindle, 'forget,' and misrepresent cheerfully and as abundantly as possible. Tis not that I can't repay your loan; 'tis that I've sold all properties of mine you could seize, so there's nothing you can do to harm me now. With the greatest of pleasure, I refuse to repay your loan."

"Paraster, Paraster, is this how men grow rich in Athkatla? And keep heads on their shoulders long enough to enjoy anything? Ye can't have learned such imprudence at home! Why, I've been trading in Athkat—"

"I know, I know, longer than- I've been alive. Old man, spare me your wheezings. The plain truth is you can't harm me right now, with all the shieldings awake around me. You can't hurt me on my way out of Waterdeep from your quaint old mansion because of my magic and all of my guards—not just the ones you see waiting outside your gates, but others who have magic of their own. Even with the influence you shamelessly use by pretending to be a Lord of Waterdeep, you can't seize any city properties from me, because I haven't any! I don't scare, I can't be bluffed, and I don't care. Old Wolf, you're toothless! When all Athkatla, and Water-deep, too, hears of this, it won't be you they'll be cheering or me they'll be laughing at! Do you have any idea how many men have been itching for decades to see old Mirt the Moneylender get his comeuppance? Why, I'll ride into Athkatla a hero!"

The old man behind the desk raised one wintry eyebrow. "Paraster Montheir, importer of sweet wines from Lapaliiya, our hero? Nay, I can't see that on banners fluttering above

the Coinheap of Amn."
He stretched, showed his waistcoat some mercy by letting go of it, and continued, "Lad, lad, we both know ye haven't been
unburdened of properties at all! Ye've established three new trading companies whose sole staff are servants already in the pay of one Paraster Montheir, and 'sold' no less than three tall-houses—with tenant shops, mind—six warehouses, and two villas (the which ye no doubt hope I know nothing at all about) to these new-minted companies. The coins all three reap flow right back into a purse emblazoned with the name of 'Paraster Montheir.' Have ye forgotten that the bankers in Water-deep are—ahem—moneylenders? Think ye we never talk to each other? I suppose ye also think the tides come not in and the sun may decide not to rise every morn? The rules of our profession are clear: Debts must be repaid in full and on time, arrears attract Palace-set rates of interest, and deliberate or hostile debtors may be flogged by the creditor, who may choose to accept double the interest owing to refrain from cracking a whip over the miscreant who owes him, or not, or seize goods in lieu—purely as he chooses!"
Paraster lifted a hand that glittered with many gem-studded rings, waved it dismissively, and said coolly, "Spit and snarl all you like, Mirt. Three facts remain unchanged for all your blustering: I've torn up my copy of our agreement, you won't dare show yours to any court or guild here or in Athkatla because the last thing you want is for me to tell any city officials what shady and outright illicit activities you've been up to that the bond directly supports and turns upon, and I'm not afraid of the private, outside-the-law muscle you can command."
At that moment the Old Wolf's young strumpet in black leathers hastened into the office through a curtained archway that Montheir had thought led only to an alcove. Had the doxy been listening to all of this? Well, silencing her

would prove but a trifling trouble and hurt the old moneylender even more keenly! She knelt before the desk, head bowed.
"Speak, lass," the Old Wolf murmured casually," then depart in all haste. Important trade matters are being discussed."
Asper looked up and gasped timidly, "If it pleases my Lord to know, the Lady Mage of Waterdeep has arrived." Her left eyelid—the one on the far side from Montheir's devouring gaze—dropped just a trifle, in a wink that let Mirt know that Laeral had been with her in the alcove, listening to all of the Athkatlan's words.
Neither she nor Mirt turned their heads so much as an inch in the wine importer's direction, but they both knew how much he'd suddenly stiffened and gone pale at the mention of Laeral and the sudden thought that she just might be Mirt's outside-the-law muscle.
Mirt stared stonily back at her and snapped, "She may approach—on her knees, mind, and begging for mercy."
"Yes, Lord," Asper breathed, bowing her head hastily. "I shall impart your will to her."
She kissed the rug before his boots and backed away from him on her knees, clear across the room to the archway and through its curtain. Once safely unseen by visiting Athkatlan swindlers, she rose with the suppleness of a snake and a wide grin on her face to find Laeral stifling a giggle.
The Lady Mage of Waterdeep gave her a quick, wordless hug and dropped to her own knees. Pinching the inside of her nose high up with two long-nailed fingers so that tears of pain came to her eyes, she let them run artistically down her cheeks, dropped a look of despair across her face, and commenced her own long crawl through the curtain and across the gigantic snowcat-fur rug.
"Mercy, Lord Mirt," she whimpered, lifting her tearstained face at about the halfway-point of her journey. "Please! You must give me more time to pay, I beg of you! Khelben sends word that he, too, will come to you on his knees if that is

your wish and that you must understand
that he wants me to do everything I can to please you! Everything!"
Paraster Montheir stared open-mouthed at the most powerful woman in Waterdeep crawling along on the furs with her tear-glistening face raised pleadingly to the moneylender, but Mirt barely glanced at her.
"Aye, aye," he growled, "Khelben knows my weakness for pretty lasses. Tell him—after I've finished with ye—that he seeks to buy my patience but succeeds only in trying it. Now, plead as if ye really meant it! Grind thyself into my floor, kiss my boots, and keep on kissing them until I give ye leave to cease!"
"Oh, most gracious of men, flower of mercy," Laeral wept, "your kindness warms me! I'm unworthy to kiss your boots and the feet within them, but please allow me to do so! Command me as your slave! Oh, Mirt, all Water-deep lives and breathes because of your deeds and coins and wisdom, and I'm so ashamed at my failure to repay in time! Just a few days more, perhaps a tenday, and—"
"Start licking," Mirt growled, watching the grandly clad woman snaking her way forward. Hurriedly Laeral threw herself across the remaining expanse of furs to the toes of his worn, flopping seaboots and lavished kisses upon them, her shapely behind in the air.
All the color had gone out of Paraster Montheir's face, leaving it the color of an old, dirty seal tusk. Mirt looked up at him and then back at the woman at his feet, frowned thoughtfully, and grunted, "Well, now, perhaps there is a way ye and Khelben could hurl magics to aid me in a little matter. Keep licking, wench! I gave ye no command to stop, did I?"
"Mirt," the Athkatlan wine-merchant stammered hastily, "I've changed my mind. You'll have your money in full later in the day, plus double interest for the tenday arrears. I'll
send it to you here, in the hands of my banker's trusties,

forthwith! Ah—"
The old moneylender rose, no trace of a grin on his face, and snapped, "Be still and speak not" to the Lady Mage at his feet. He pointed at Montheir and growled, "I accept, in gold coins of a minting, weight, and condition as would be accepted by a guildmaster of this city. Wait to send the coin-carriers until sundown."
He took something that had been hanging on the quillons of a scabbarded sword low on the wall behind his desk into his hand, and Montheir saw that it was a whip. Mirt lashed the palm of his own hand thoughtfully, looked down at the backside of the silently kneeling Lady Mage, then lifted his gaze to the Athkatlan again and added, "Ye see, I'll probably be busy until then."
Paraster Montheir swallowed, nodded hastily, and was still nodding with a sickly grin coming and going on his face when Mirt barked, "Asper! To me! Hasten, no need to crawl!"
The lithe, leather-clad lass raced into view through the archway and came to a halt with hands at her sides, as alert and straight-backed-rigid as any Palace guard standing to attention.
"Conduct our valued friend Master Montheir to the gates with all courtesy," Mirt commanded her.
"At once, my Lord!" she breathed and made her turn toward the Athkatlan merchant almost a leap of eagerness. "This way, honored merchant," she urged, indicating the door with a flourish as if he'd never seen it before, bowing low, then leaping to open it for him.
Swallowing again, Paraster Montheir nodded hastily to Mirt, turned, and waved at Asper to precede him.
She bowed to him again and did so, slowing to offer him her arm on the broad rough-slab stairs that descended into the forehall past rows of figureheads and bowsprit filigrees
salvaged from wrecks in the dangerous coastal seas just north of Waterdeep.
At about the sixth step down, Asper murmured, "If youll

allow me to say this, Master Montheir, you are a very brave man."
The Athkatlan looked at her sharply, seeking any hint of sarcasm or perhaps pleading or admiration, but her eyes were downcast and her face unreadable.
Paraster made no immediate reply, but when they reached the bottom of the stair and a sharp singing in the air around him announced the passage of his shielding magics out through a stronger, invisible enchantment, he murmured in a low voice, "He won't really whip the Lady Mage of Waterdeep, will he?"
"Oh, yes," Asper replied, slowing and turning to look at him with eyes that were large and grave. "In fact, Khelben insists on it."
"The Blackstaff? He does?"
"Oh, yes," Asper told him, not loosening the clasp of their linked arms as they walked on. "Laws are laws, and a bond is a bond. Let me show you something."
Laden servants were hastening back and forth across the forehall between the pantry and a shuttered larder where wagons left deliveries. Asper reached out her free hand to a passing maidservant. "Maerilee—show this honored merchant your back."
Maerilee nodded, undid a bodice-lacing atop one of her shoulders, turned away, and let her garment fall to her waist. Across shoulder blades and a deep-corded back, Montheir found himself gazing upon a webwork of deep white and purple scars.
The servant looked at Asper, who nodded, and Maerilee bowed her head and went on her way. "She displeased my lord," Asper told the Athkatlan softly, "over a debt."
Paraster Montheir said nothing and remained silent as
she conducted him out through the great entry doors of the mansion, but he nodded to her as he would to an equal as they parted on the broad top step of the outside stairs.
He looked back once as he joined his guards and shuddered

as he saw the wench in leathers wave casually to the two gargoyles—if that's what they were; great stone beasts with wings and claws and tusks—perched atop the doorposts, receiving their solemn salutes in return.

Asper seemed to speak to someone else as she turned to go in, someone ghostly, whose feminine head and shoulders seemed solid enough but who trailed away to nothingness well above the ground. The doors of Mirt's Mansion closed softly, and Paraster Montheir found himself listening to a high wail of pain coming from somewhere within that old, ramshackle, fortresslike house.

Asper smiled and shook her head as she shot the last bolt and turned back toward the stairs. The problem with watchghosts like Ieiridauna was that they loved dramatics. That cry of pain sounded more like a large and enthusiastic wildcat in heat than a woman in pain.

On the other hand, perhaps 'twas overly harsh to criticize another's acting. Laeral had been so overblown as to be about as convincing as a slap-puppet play—though it had worked, hadn't it?—and if things had gone on much longer, a certain lass who rejoiced in the name of Asper couldn't have avoided bursting into wild, helpless laughter. Shaking her head, she retraced her steps to Mirt's office.

This was an occasion when a little untruth served everyone well. There was no need for Paraster Montheir of Athkatla to learn that Maerilee Goodfellow had received her spectacular scars in pirate slavery in the Nelanther or how much Mirt had paid for her freedom when she'd caught his eye. There was no need for a lot of merchants in bustling Waterdeep to learn a lot of things. When bound by

carefully guided ignorance, they led—in Asper's opinion, at least, and she'd seen much of both ignorant and wise merchants and the few traders whose forebearers had done so well at making coins that they'd become the city's nobles—better lives. The truly wise were rare gems, but a few scraps of wisdom tended to make men dangerous.

Wherefore Waterdeep was a groaning, overladen cart heaped high with danger. As Asper smiled ruefully to herself and strolled back into the office, Mirt was growling, "Just what sort of attack could lay low one of ye Seven? Not something I'd want to be in the same kingdom as,.I'm thinking...."

Laeral nodded to Asper over the rim of a huge goblet that sparkled with deep blue Sossal snow wine. The Lady Mage was sitting with her booted feet up on Mirt's desk enjoying a good reward for her playacting whilst the Old Wolf prowled the room, barking questions at her. f

"My sister is not hiding from foes she fears or nursing wounds," she replied calmly. "She's doing what we so often must: reacting to being hit on the nose with a new ball she's never seen before. She had no idea she needed to be juggling it among all the others we must keep in the air constantly, so she's letting some lesser balls bounce by themselves for a day or two, while she learns what she must about the new one, to know best how to handle it."

"High Lady Alustriel will be delayed arriving in Water-deep, I take it?" Asper asked swiftly, helping herself to the decanter of snow wine.

"I'm afraid so. On the other hand, it will be days yet before Shandril reaches Waterdeep, even if her caravan has a clear run, and we know the maid from Highmoon has power enough to defend herself for a few days longer."

"More than enough, I'm thinking," Mirt growled. " Tis in my mind, Laeral m'gel, that spellfire in the hands of a youngling untutored in magic or by Mystra may become like

a wind-driven forest fire: stronger as it goes on and soon out of control and needing mages working on all sides to prevent it overwhelming everyone. Each time Shan used it when I was with her, her confidence and power seemed to grow. Can her will and backbone keep pace with its flaring? I hate to say this, but I doubt it."

Laeral nodded grimly. "As do I, Old Wolf." She took a long sip

from her goblet and added, "I'm afraid you know too much about how magic works to be wrong in this hunch."
"Knowing my Lord," Asper said fondly, as she put an arm around Mirt from behind, "I'm sure he's hurled queries at you like a busy slinger hurling stones in battle and heard this from you already—but if 'tis not a deep, close secret, Laeral: what attack?"
"While trying to enter some of the vaults of great magic deep beneath her palace in Silverymoon," the Lady Mage replied, "Alustriel was beset by a storm of spells launched by lurking mages—a cabal of unfamiliar and strangely empowered wizards."
"She survived, so much I know. Did they gain access to the vaults?"
"No, but they seemed able to take refuge in the Weave itself when she struck back at them."
"And reading the Weave, she learned what about them?"
Amusement rose and danced in Laeral's eyes. "You know all that you need to know—and more—about the Art, too, it seems. Well, then, my sister's attackers seemed to be incorporeal, half-insane wizards who'd passed beyond life into unlife in some new and hitherto unknown way. 'Mere memories of mages,' she called them."
Asper rolled her eyes. "Haven't we enough magic surging and drifting and scuttling around Faerun, without something new to—"
The watchghost began to scream in earnest, a great deafening bell-shrieking that roared up the stairs and swept toward them, making the stones of the old house around them shake and then the very air hum and wail.
The scream that burst into the office shattered goblets and decanters into dust and hurled Asper, Mirt, and Laeral back against the walls like mere rags, surging up toward the ceiling, to wrestle there with something dark, startled, and suddenly visible.
Once, Evaereol Rathrane had been alive. There was a dim

and distant time when he'd known laughter, warm embraces, and proud achievements in Jethaere of the Towers. Jethaere—one of the first floating cities of Netheril, a refuge of the gentler mages who delighted in studying and perfecting magic, rather than using it as a great sword to cleave and reshape Toril a dozen times in a day.

There had come the time when it darkened, as all things must. That darkness had been the Phaerimm. Against them some Jethaerren had fought and perished, and some had fled by many ways, down a myriad of twisting tunnels of hiding and transformation and flight. Some had died, some had turned into things they were loath now to leave the ranks of—or were trapped in the shapes of ... and many, many had gone mad.

Evaereol had spell-called a dragon as the darkness blossomed, then hid himself within one of the greatest magic items he'd ever crafted. His ploy had worked. Snatched up and carried off into a distant hoard, he'd escaped the Phaerimm . . . but been trapped in his own disguise for a time so mind-singingly long as to almost break him.

He'd clung to his own name desperately, drifting in increasing despair, until the day came at last when someone's

misuse of the item that held him shattered it and its spells together and set him free.

Long he'd drifted, a tattered wraith of spellstuff with whispering awareness and a burning will, until he chanced upon magic so strong that it was a blinding beacon.

To it he crept, hunger growing, and so found Silverymoon and its palace where trapped magics of tome and item were strongest, with a human woman who seemed like a flame of living magic at its heart.

Others of Rathrane's kind had gathered there, too, to warm themselves in the spellglows and slowly grow stronger and more substantial. In the magics cast on stone and glass and

air many Netherese mage-wraiths lurked, watching this Alustriel of Silverymoon.

Evaereol Rathrane had not been bold when he dwelt in Jethaere, but the long, long waiting had changed something in him. He needed to act, to reach out—not to savage this woman of such achingly strong magic and drink her power, as his fellows sighed for, but to find more like her and ride the Weave that enwrapped her like a cloak wherever she went.

So he held back from striking at her, mastering his hunger when his fellow mage-wraiths could not. He saw them ravaged and yet invigorated by her counter spells, and in the wake of their defeat he saw his own chance. Forthwith he rode the spell-link between Laeral and Alustriel. Another she-wizard of blinding power! This one seemingly as yet undetected by others of his kind, so his alone!

When these mightiest of mortal mages translocated, the rush of exchanged energies gave Evaereol Rathrane power he could taste, lasting power that gave him more substance each time. This Laeral-she teleported often in her tower that blazed with an everpresent field of translocational magic, and every journey he took with her was a burst of ecstasy to Evaereol—real, lasting power.

Soon he'd dare to do more tnan uirK aim uid.ni me u^o-charges of wild spells and decaying magics. Soon, he would —

Once, Ieiridauna Amalree had been alive. There was a dim and distant time when she'd lived and laughed in the lone, proud tower of the mages Nathra, her elf mother, and Phanturgost, her human father, and thought Water-deep the greatest shining place on Toril. That had ended when the sorcerers who treacherously slew her parents after coining as guests to eveningfeast had struck her down, too, with so many spells as she fled clutching precious magics that the explosions had trapped her sentience in the Weave. It had been long years ere she was aware of herself again and

longer before she could perceive and materialize once more in the tower where she'd died.

It had become part of a large and rambling mansion in her lost years, the abode of a fat, shambling man who at first horrified and disgusted her. Then, ever so slowly, her feelings toward this Mirt had changed. It had begun after she became able to vocalize and show herself and seek to scare him as a "haunting," knowing what she'd become. She succeeded only in amusing him, then in awakening his pity. He sought to chat with her on long, lonely nights, and when she dared converse, he flirted with her, tried to befriend her, and asked what he could do to make her welcome and happy.

"Ye could get out of my house!" she'd shrieked at him that first time, centuries of rage and grief overwhelming her. She had been taken with shame when he pursued her weeping and sought to learn of her life. So had his lady, the impish Asper, who even invited her into their shared bed, betimes sought to play games with her, and seldom forgot to tell her gossip and unfolding news upon her every return to what now even Ieiridauna was pleased to call "Mirt's Mansion."

Other buildings, even in Waterdeep, had watchghosts, but Ieiridauna doubted many of them felt as happy as she.

Now, upon the heels of that unpleasant Athkatlan's visit, something dark and unseen had come into the house. Lurking near the Master and the Mistress and their friend, so subtle among the shielding magics that she'd not sensed it until it reached out, so silent and sinister ...

With a shriek of rage and fear that her happiness was to be snatched away from her once more, Ieiridauna hurled herself from the forehall up the stairs to the office, whelming the protective magics of the house around her like a cloak of magic, armor and weapon both against this dark intruder.

He—somehow she knew it was a "he"—sought to drink spells, to gorge himself on the magic she'd freed to empower

herself, but Ieiridauna spun bright fire out of the energies surging through her, feeding it to him, then calling it back to her like savage claws to rake him and shred him. It took but a few whirling, shrieking seconds to drive him howling away....

Moaning and whimpering to himself in spinning silence, Evaereol Rathrane drifted torn and ravaged across Waterdeep, helpless once more and hurting. Below him magic winked and flared, a field of glittering flames to his gaze. He gasped and let himself fall toward this well of so many magics, warring and flashing or slumbering on all sides. None of them so bright as the two ladies of the Weave, but one
thing, at least, hadn't changed since nis aimry rem^niu^eu days in Jethaere: If you came too close, bright flames still burned you.

Before whatever it was had attacked him, slashing at him with too much power to master in so short a time, the Laeral-she had spoken with others about "real power," and the word "spellfire" had been uttered. Now, that was something to seek, surely. An amount of power that the Laeral-she spoke of with respect must be great indeed . . . and just what he needed.

Yet his approach must be cautious, lest bright flames burn him once more.

The shadowy thing that had been Rathrane of Jethaere sank into the glittering carpet of small magics that was Waterdeep's Castle Ward, dreaming of spellfire ... and greatness.

DEATH AND DARK SURPRISES

Life holds moments of joy and glee and glory. Try to brand them into your memories, to take out and clutch close and comfort in when life serves up its far more abundant harvests: of fear, cold, loneliness, rage, death and dark surprises.

Tessaril Winter, Lady Lord of Eveningstar

No Greater Honour: My Service To the Dragon
Year of the Crown

The wagons were rolling along the Trade Way into the bright morning of another day. Arauntar and the other guards spurred their horses up and down the rumbling line with renewed vigor after an uneventful night. The Black-rocks looked as wild and windswept and empty of beasts as ever on all sides of Voldovan's caravan, as Narm sat on the wagon-perch beside Shandril and gave her his four hundred and sixth anxious sidelong look since awakening.

This time, Shandril looked back at him and snapped, "Are you going to do that all the way to Waterdeep? Tis me! Shan, not some crawling, shiny-scaled monster!"

"What's wrong?" he asked quietly, by way of reply.

Shandril abruptly looked away, saying nothing, and they sat side by side in silence for a time as the wagon bounced and rumbled on.

There came an especially violent crash and lurch, and Narm flung his arm around his lady as he always did. This time Shandril clung to him when the rocking of the wagon subsided and murmured into his chest, "The spellfire: I'm starting to dream of it, now, just blazing away endlessly. It boils up in me, making me hot, and drives me awake . . . and when I waken, I find it leaking out of my fingers, as little flames."

"I know," Narm replied, even more quietly. "That's why yon blanket was wet this morn. It started to smolder and woke me. I dunked it in the fire-bucket."

"Without waking me? The bucket must've been right beside you!"

"That's where it's been these last few nights ... ever since you scorched me."

Shandril gasped and stared up into his face. "I—you never told me!"

Narm gave her a thin smile. "Why? To keep you awake worrying about it, or have you insist on sleeping outside the

wagon or somewhere else where I couldn't touch you or guard you? How would that help either of us?"

They stared at each other for what seemed like a very long time, as the wagon rocked and rumbled, before Shandril asked pleadingly, "Narm, what am I going to doT

Narm opened his mouth twice, then closed it again before uttering a word. They both knew he had no answer to give her.

"Patience," Korthauvar Hammantle murmured, leaning forward over a crystal ball that mirrored the whirling glow of his still-forming farscrying spell. "The Cult warriors lie in wait, and the caravan has almost reached them. Whatever . befalls, our tarrying is almost at an end. It won't be long now."

Hlael Toraunt threw up his hands with a loud sigh. "Cult warriors!" he echoed. "Swordheads who serve the Dragon-worshipers, not us! Drauthtar's not going to like this!"

"Pray let me be the judge of what Drauthtar does and does not like," a voice said crisply and coldly out of the tall, half-empty decanter hard by Korthauvar's elbow. The two Zhentarim wizards stiffened in unison, knowing all too well who they were hearing.

"D-drauthtar?" Hlael asked faintly. "You—you approve, then? Or desire us to act differently?"

"I've desired the two of you to act differently for years," was the curt reply, "but I entertain similar desires for most lesser mages of the Brotherhood. I see far too much wild, ruthless ambition and far too little obedience to orders and diligence to decreed strategies—too much treachery and too little teamwork. Yet my patience outstrips Korthauvar's as the sun outshines a candle. Manshoon himself—dragonriding, no less—went boldly after spellfire and was forced into flight. Many, many more Brotherhood mages after him made their own reckless snatches at spellfire and paid with their lives. If you have more success than they did, I'll overlook the time you took."

"And if we don't?" Hlael managed to ask through a very dry throat.
"The time for overlooking will then be past," the decanter replied. "Both on the part of your superiors in the Brotherhood
and of this Shandril who hurls spellfire at annoying mages."
Hlael Toraunt started to tremble so violently that the decanter rattled on its tray, but the voice came no more. Even after Korthauvar let his spell collapse to snatch up the decanter and hurl it into bursting shards and wet-spraying wine against the nearest wall, neither mage felt any the less watched.
Zhentarim wizards seldom do.
"They've moved swiftly," Thoadrin said approvingly. "Better light for us to shoot and scramble in, and even more weariness for their beasts!" He looked up and down the men ranged along the rocks, and growled, "Remember: no man looses a quarrel until my signal!"
Not waiting for their nods and muttered replies, he peered across the gulf of air to the rocks that rose on the far side of the Trade Way—straight into the eyes of Laranthan, who gave him a reassuring nod and the fist-on-chest gesture that warriors use to mean "All is ready, and I await your signal."
Good. He wanted no one to have time to turn and flee or rush off out of bowshot and then scramble up into the rocks to come creeping along after his men. Let them all rumble right into his trap. If his men downed enough beasts of the first few wagons, they'd doubtless crash or stop in disarray, forming a barricade for the rest to crowd up behind. The road would become a shooting-gallery—hopefully long enough to reduce Voldovan's guards to nigh-none.
The Cult of the Dragon might not have the fell reputation of all these high and mighty wizards, these Zhents and Thayans and Arcane Brotherhoods, but their claws were real enough—and one of them, now smiling grimly at the approaching dust-cloud and thunder of wagons, was named

Thoadrin.

Soon it would be blood time, and they'd send their bolts hissing down. Thoadrin crouched behind his rock smiling in satisfaction. A near-perfect ambush; slaughtering Voldovan's men would be a trifling amount of trouble.

"In fact," he said aloud to the heedless air, "no trouble at all." He raised his hand, making sure both Laranthan and his own line of men could see it, and held it high as the first caravan guards trotted past below him. Tense, he awaited just the right moment to bring it down and unleash hissing death.

"I don't like the look of this," Narm said suddenly, snatching up the shield from its hooks. "Look at Beldimarr—and Arauntar, too! They're—"

"I can see," Shandril said harshly, eyes dark and hair stirring around her shoulders. Narm looked at her, opening his mouth to tell her to raise her own shield, and saw spellfire rising from her arms and flickering out of her face. He shuddered, said nothing, and lifted the old shield, leaning as close to her as he dared. The air itself crackled and howled past his ear and cheek as spellfire rose. Someone shouted ahead, someone screamed, Beldimarr cursed horribly, and the air came alive with the sound of a dozen crossbow bolts.

The guard beside Voldovan took one in the throat, threw up his arms, and pitched over backward, falling from his saddle like a felled tree.

The caravan master snarled out an oath and grabbed at the shield bouncing on its hooks on the dead man's saddle, trying to get it free. The next quarrel took him through the arm and sent the frightened horse with the empty saddle leaping away from his roar of pain. Quarrels were thudding into Narm's shield and piercing half through it, burning into his ribs, and he was too busy scrambling and flinching away and gasping out curses of his own to see more.

Shandril took one look at the chaos of archery and dying horses and men and shouted, "Take my legs! Hold me up!"

Letting his shield slide and hang from its straps, Narm scrambled to obey her. Shandril stood up on the perch, flung her arms wide, and gathered spellfire around herself in a great snarling cloak of rushing flames.

Crossbow bolts leaped into those flames and hissed away to ashes, one of them crumbling and falling away inches from Narm's nose. He yelped but clung grimly to his lady's thighs, hooking his feet around the edges of the wagon-perch door, trying as best he could to brace her against the jarring and bouncing. The horses reared and tossed their heads and snorted, reins swung slack like wild ribbons in the air ... and Shandril's spellfire roared out over their heads, lashing the rocks on either side of the road with leaping, scorching flame.

The firing was becoming more ragged as Thoadrin's men ran out of cocked and loaded crossbows to snatch up and aim, but Orthil Voldovan's run seemed ruined indeed. A wagon had crashed onto its side, ahead, dead horses were dragging in harness everywhere, and there were more guards sprawled lifeless on the ground under maddened hooves than were still running about swinging futile swords and shouting.

Shandril saw Arauntar grimly scrambling up the rocks, sword in hand. Above him were the helmed heads of grinning warriors who'd gathered to stab him in the face the moment he climbed within reach. She sent spellfire roaring at those faces, and through the rock cleft where they'd been crouching. Letting anger take her, she poured on flames in a white,

devouring roar that broke that line of rocks away and sent them spraying and tumbling into the wilderlands beyond.

Men were hurled away as broken, boneless things amid those shards of rock. More fled headlong from behind other rocks before her flames could reach them, so she turned and served the rocks on the far side of the road the same way.

About half of that second line of rocks were gone when the

fires surging inside Shandril faltered for the first time. She shuddered and held back her spellfire, crouching down into Narm's embrace.

A head popped up around the side of an unscathed rock almost immediately, lowering a loaded crossbow to aim right at her. Shandril blasted the stone and all into nothingness ere the bolt could be fired. Beside her, Narm wrestled with the reins as their wagon slowed almost to a stop. One horse dragged limply in harness, and the others, for all their snorting terror, seeing nowhere to flee in the tangle ahead, turned in opposite directions, rocking the wagon wildly.

"They're fleeing for their lives!" someone shouted excitedly from behind Shandril—a moment before a splintering crash announced the arrival of the shouting merchant's wagon into the rear of Narm and ShandriFs ready-wagon. Horses screamed, reared, and fell heavily. In the shouting, pitching confusion Shandril stood up to blast another bowman, missed her footing, and fell on top of Narm with a gasp.

A crossbow quarrel promptly hummed right past both their noses and cracked off the side of the wagon, showering them with slivers of wood. "Enough adventure for you?" Narm grunted, as he tried to drag them both back inside while still flat on his back with Shandril twisted atop him. He failed miserably.

"No," she gasped back, with a short, choked-off laugh as her breath gave way, a single wisp of spellfire darting from her mouth, "there's never enough!"

"That's what I was afraid of," Narm muttered, trying again to worm his way back into the wagon. Another crossbow bolt tore through someone's canvas nearby with a vicious zip.

The horses all around them fell away into heaps of bone, and dark whirlwinds roared up from where their bodies had been to form a snarling, darkening cloud overhead.

"Oh, bloody Mystra!" Narm gasped, awe suddenly warring with dread in him.

Shandril nodded numbly. As the cloud grew larger and

darker, men shouted in fear all around them . . . and the towering darkness seemed to lean forward as if it wanted to fall on her.

"Theldarace Norlaund, Finecarver" said the sign on the side of the wagon, and the slender, swift-to-smile man who rode inside answered to that name. Neat, trim travel racks sharing the wagon with him securely held the wares he sold, which bore out his claim to be a seller and carver of long, curving pipes for the dedicated smoker of aromatic blends and both longhorns and songhorns for minstrels and musicians. Beautiful things, glossy-polished and as delightful to the eye as elven-work. No one had seen Norlaund do any carving during the run, but the road through the Black-rocks was hardly conducive to any exacting work—least of all tasks done with sharp knives that didn't involve savage letting of blood.

Orthil Voldovan had his suspicions about the carver and his two close-mouthed, armed-to-the-teeth servants, who doubled as Norlaund's drovers—but then, Orthil Voldovan had his suspicions about everybody.

In this case, however, the long-honed Voldovan instincts had been right to rise warily to the alert. Theldarace Norlaund also

had another name, though few outside the Zhentarim knew it. He was one of their most capable and trusted—so much as any member of the Brotherhood is trusted, by fellow Zhents—ambitious young magelings and was proud to hear the name "Aumlar Chaunthoun" uttered with grudging respect by no less a personage than Sememmon, the Lord of Darkhold.

Thrice he'd been sent out on difficult missions, tasks he'd been expected to die trying to carry out, Aumlar had no doubt. Thrice he'd come back triumphant. His hand had falsified wills and trade treaties alike. He'd slain certain persons so there were no witnesses and naught was left of them but ashes and impersonated them thereafter for short

but crucial times—such as guild meetings. As a result, no less than three Sembian merchant companies and one old-coin Sembian family were now Zhentarim-con-trolled . . . and knew it not. Moreover, several influential traders in Amn and Tethyr now took orders from the Brotherhood and knew it not. A Waterdhavian guildmaster knew all too well who held the leash about his neck, but he loved that neck too much to dare try to slip that leash and so bowed to the Brotherhood's covert will. All these things were the work of Aumlar Chaunthoun.

His latest orders had been to find and keep watch over one Shandril Shessair, the lass who wielded spellfire, to see exactly where she went, what she did, and whom she consorted with—no more.

Aumlar was no fool. He lusted after spellfire but knew he'd never live to master it, even if he somehow wrested it from the maid out in the wilderlands. This caravan was a-crawl with Zhentarim, Dragon Cult, and other covert agents, all of them waiting to savage each other once any of them moved openly against Shandril.

It was time to start that bloodletting, to thin the ranks of his rivals. Perhaps he could learn some secrets of spellfire he wouldn't have to share—or at the very least, uncover the girl's limitations.

It was time. Tarry any longer, and Waterdeep would be too close—near enough to flee to, and close enough that ambitious Waterdhavians could ride out and launch their own snares and ploys and outright attacks. Now was the time.

If he did it deftly, no one would know who'd launched the spell that started it. She'd rend it, of course, so all it had to be was large, overblown, and spectacular.

The second spell slicing in behind it was the one he wanted to reach her—the one that might give him a whisper-link to Shandril's mind, or failing that to the thoughts of her husband, the weakling Narm. A way to hear and see

snatches of what they were thinking, and murmur the occasional suggestion into their dreams. A hook in the mouth of the most prized fish in Faerun, a hook the fish hopefully wouldn't even know was there.

Now! Bane above, the lass had just stopped hurling spell-fire and fallen. If it hadn't been for her man, she'd have gone right off that wagon and been trampled! She must be drained or wounded! Now!

On his knees in the wagon, Aumlar snatched the sack of horsebones. Slipping his arm through a safety-sling to keep from falling, he thrust candles in through the little door of the swaying, dancing lantern that hung from the roof-tree. They seemed to take a very long time to catch alight, and he was hissing a steady stream of heartfelt curses against Mystra and Tymora ere he was able to sit down again, with blazing candles dripping hot wax all over his fingers, and ram them into the waiting iron prongs of his floor-brazier.

Kneeling behind it, he was tall enough to see out over the perch into the chaos of wagons sideswiping each other—and keep his eyes on Shandril. "Stay where you are!" he roared to his two Zhentilar body-blades. They both made quick the double-slaps on their biceps that signaled they'd heard and would obey.

Aumlar glared between them as he chanted the incantation and held ends of horse bone in both candle flames, keeping his eyes and will fiercely fixed on Shandril. The spell ended, the bones fell to dust in his hands, and the smoke became heavy green floor-crawling death-gas.

Outside the slowing, rattling wagon, horses all around suddenly collapsed into clattering, bouncing bones, and dark streams of spell-smoke whirled up from where they'd been.

One of his guards cursed under his breath, knowing just who'd spun this dark magic, and Aumlar grinned savagely as it took shape—perfectly. He'd only dared practice this stolen Mulhorandi spell once before, but it was coalescing

faultlessly. A darkening, swiftly growing cloud was expanding above the knot of wagons, the life-force of dozens of horses snarling up into it like so many tiny cyclones feeding the same lord of storms overhead . . .

As Aumlar bent his will on it and shook out of his sleeves what he'd need for his second spell, the cloud rose up like a dark castle tower, leaning over Shandril Shessair like a watchful hawk in the last moment ere it arrowed down to strike at her.

The wizard thumbed open both small coffers. In one were a few hairs he'd watched Shandril snag on a rough wagon-board, before tearing herself impatiently free. In the other were a few Narm had tugged out of his own head with impatient fingers. From them, Aumlar would with a few muttered words spin a darting thing of stealthy silence to race along in the wake of his Doom of Swords spell. It would do the real harm to the lass that some capricious god or goddess had seen fit to bestow spellfire upon.

"Is it you, Mystra?" he whispered aloud, as he held up a hair in each hand and called the right incantation to mind. "Are you testing us all, once more?"

Blue fire flashed through the dark corners of his mind, just for an instant, and for the first time in months Aumlar Chaunthoun tasted real fear, like cold iron in his mouth. What else could this be but an answer from the goddess?

She was watching him, by the Weave!

"Oh, Mystra," he whispered, voice quavering, and then found himself casting his second spell before he'd quite decided to start unleashing it.

He always thought, afterward, that his casting of the dreamwhisper was Mystra's doing.

The man who was not Haransau Olimer lifted the bowgun, took careful aim, and waited. The maroon-topped wagon was slowing and slewing around as the carter on the perch fought the reins, snarling horrible curses. In a moment its door-flap would be facing him, and—

A man's head thrust out, looking first to the left. The Dark Blade of Doom fired and saw the merchant who was really a Zhentarim turn back to face his deadly dart. The peering face suddenly grew the dart in its nose. Jerking his head back, the Zhent fell back out of view.

One of the horses reared, and the swearing carter almost fell off his perch. He hadn't even seen his master die.

Marlel smiled softly and went back to being patient.

The dark-robed figure floated up the lightless shaft, paying no heed to the helmed horrors who drifted nearer,

coldly flickering-black blades extended menacingly before them. Drauthtar Inskirl had not lasted so long in the Zhentarim by being stupid, or easily cowed. When it pleased the gods—or some cruel superior or overreaching underling in the Brotherhood—to hand him death, his passing would befall, regardless of his desires. Wherefore he sought his pleasures where he saw opportunity, holding back nothing for later, and devoted his efforts to being as indispensable as it's possible for a Zhent wizard to be.

There was no mage more loyal or as well positioned in the evershifting tides of Brotherhood intrigue as the one now passing through the sudden ruby flare of a last defensive spell and stepping onto a platform high up in the dark and seemingly endless shaft.

This was not a stronghold known to many outside the Zhentarim, and the man who waited in its more exalted chambers was a mystery even to most of the Brotherhood. Eirhaun had been a trading partner and crony of Manshoon before the formation of the Zhentarim, and he now commanded the shadowy handful of Zhents who watched their fellow members of the Brotherhood for signs of treachery ... or drifting overmuch in loyalty toward Bane and his most ambitious priest, Fzoul.

To speak of the incident that had left Eirhaun with a hand whose fingers were snakes, two empty eyesockets, and an escort of four tiny flying spheres that each sported a single

humanlike eye, was to die swiftly and painfully. It had something to do with both Fzoul and Manshoon, Drauthtar knew, but he did as he always did: looked at that eyeless head and spoke to it, as if Eirhaun still had eyes like other men.

The Maimed Wizard stood in shadow, with four guardian gargoyles crouched on pillars around him, looking like the high arched back of a throne Eirhaun happened to be standing in rather than sitting upon. The hand of hissing snakes waved in greeting. "What news?"

"Hammantle and Toraunt still wait and watch. They've convinced themselves that they tarry out of clever strategy, not out of naked fear of spellfire or the sneaking desire to postpone our wrath as long as possible. I've let them spin their own dooms because I'm as interested as they are in the spellstorm that's going to erupt any moment now in that caravan."

"The Cult of the Dragon, the Red Wizards, the Arcane Brotherhood, and half the happy dancing gods and those who revere them are slavering after spellfire," Eirhaun responded. It was not a question.

"All of them have gone along on this caravan with the wench who wields spellfire in their midst. If nothing else, we can slaughter a healthy tally of rivals based in and about Scornubel, when the bloodletting finally starts."

"We?"

"Mhegras and Sabran, riding a wagon together; the ever-capable Aumlar—w •

"Unh, that one. Trouble ahead for us all if he gets it."

"Spellfire?"

"Of course. Who else?"

"Praulgar, posing as a pot-seller, and the usual three or four magelings out to make a name for themselves."

"And your intention is?"

"To watch and wait even as Hammantle and Toraunt do, goading them into action if the Cult or the Thayans or

someone else gets spellfire—and in the meantime do nothing. There's nothing to report, so I've kept silent."
"I shall do the same. Until something befalls to shift who holds power, spellfire and otherwise, there's no need to inform Manshoon. Those who come to the notice of our Dread Lord are wise to do so only in ways that please him."
Drauthtar inclined his head. "Indeed. I have no other news."
"And I, no orders for you at this time. You have leave to depart."
Drauthtar bowed his head again, and turned to go. He took two steps, then looked sharply to his right, to where the shadows were deepest. There had been the slightest of flickers—
"You're alone, Eirhaun?" he snapped, turning to face the disturbance. "No other mages?"
"None. Who could cleave all these shieldings? I was warned of your approach a dozen times, as you ascended." The Maimed Wizard strode forward, frowning in alarm even as his disbelieving denials rang out. His gargoyles sprang into the air, to swoop where he was heading.
"Arrsarundae!" he snapped.
Obediently the air shimmered and burst into brightness as a magical field collapsed, flooding the chamber with the harsh white light of its slow dying.
A figure stood revealed beyond it, man-shaped and robed—and hidden again in an instant, as Drauthtar and Eirhaun both furiously snarled out incantations and moved their hands in lightning-swift gestures, hurling deadly magics at the intruder.
Scores of tiny fireballs whirled to assail that mysterious target, dozens of lightning bolts leaping past them or stabbing through them in an unleashing of fury that would have been fool-work indeed to loose in even the stoutest of castles, had Eirhaun's dozen shieldings not been there to shape and contain their destruction.
As it was, the room shook, dust showering down, and an

entire row of flagstones heaved and rippled as if some giant mole were racing along beneath them. Ears were smitten with the shrieks of shieldings torn asunder, gargoyles were hurled away like leaves flung along in a gale to be shattered and broken on far walls, the very air crackled and scorched the skins of the two wizards . . . and when the smoke and stones had fallen away, the mysterious intruder stood unscathed.

Unscathed, and stepping slowly forward, smiling.

"Hesperian!" Drauthtar spat, rage still his master.

"The same," replied the feeble old man with that amused look that Drauthtar knew so well. He was clad in the dusty maroon robes he always wore—perhaps the only clothes he had—and the same long, pointed, ridiculous shoes. They seemed relics of another age, just as the Old Man of the Zhentarim was. Our Old Mage. Not for the first -time, Drauthtar wondered if Hesperdan and Elminster were cousins, brothers, or even one and the same man . ..

That thought always made him shiver, and he shivered now. Hesperdan strolled unconcernedly between Drauthtar and Eirhaun, giving them both the same patronizing smile, and the Maimed Wizard said heavily, "You heard all the words that passed between us." Again, his words were not a question.

"Of course."

"W-what will you tell Manshoon?" Drauthtar dared to ask.

"Nothing. I, too, enjoy a good spellstorm."

A little silence followed his reply, until Eirhaun asked almost reluctantly, as if fearing the answer he'd receive: "How did you pass and hide from my shieldings?"

"Ah, yes. A fair question. When you can answer it for yourself, you'll finally be competent to perform the scour-ing-the-Brotherhood duties you've taken upon yourself, Eirhaun Sooundaeril. I hope that competence comes soon, Eirhaun. More than that, I hope it comes in time."

Drauthtar told himself to remember Eirhaun's family name,

which the Maimed Wizard never used and he'd never known. Hesperdan took another step and was abruptly not there, gone as if he'd never been present.

Drauthtar stared at the empty air that had held him, then at the scorched walls and sprawled dead gargoyles. He said feelingly, "I hate that man."

"No," the Maimed Wizard said slowly, "you don't, and neither do I. No one in the Brotherhood quite dares to hate Hesperdan, I think. We all fear him too much for that."

The dark cloud whirling above them suddenly sharpened and grew still darker. Shandril could see that it was now a forest of dark swordblades, all pointing straight down at the ground, and all whirling in swift spirals, like a hundred corkscrews.

Nay, swiftly descending spirals! Like a patiently settling mist, the cloud started to descend, draining itself away into all those swords. In a rising, discordant singing, they loomed larger and longer and darker, whirling nearer . . .

Men were shouting or crying out in frantic fear or cursing—Shandril could hear Orthil Voldovan, and Arauntar, and Beldimarr all gasping out floods of words that were cruel, colorful treasures of invective—and Narm was desperately muttering an incantation, trying to weave a counterspell when there was no time left to cast anything.

Shandril summoned up a last surge of spellfire to cleave this death that was reaching for them. As the flames started to flow, an old and coldly amused voice arose out of them, saying quite distinctly, "I hope that competence comes soon, Eirhaun. More than that, I hope it comes in time."

Mystra's doing? Who was speaking, and who was Eirhaun?

Shandril shook her head. There was no time left to wonder, no time to do anything more than nod at the aptness of the mysterious words, and gather her paltry remaining spellfire, and wait for just the right moment as the dark blades came whirling down.

FIGHTING FOR LIFE IN HAELHOLLOW

Fight, little fools! Mount your wars and raise your towers and make your chases. I like to taste well-marbled meat when I'm crunching your bones.

Hamairathgauraundon, High Wyrm of the Crags .

Words Spent On Little Fools: Instructing Humans

Year of the Watching Helm

The cloud resolved itself into a dark, glittering forest of swordblades, spinning point-first down in deadly spirals.

"No!" Korthauvar Hammantle shouted. "Don't slay her, you fool!"

"Who—?" Hlael snapped, leaning forward to see, but Korthauvar gave him no answer. The taller Zhentarim was too busy leaping to his feet and casting the strongest shielding spell he knew, as fast as his fingers could fly and his lips gasp out the incantation.

"No!" Hlael said, face paling, as he realized what Korthauvar was going to do. "You can't—"

Korthauvar could, and did. He hurled his spell into the depths of the crystal, even as Hlael threw himself and his chair over backward, scrambling to get clear before—

The crystal exploded in a bright roar of force and tinkling of razor-sharp crystal shards that peppered the walls like hard-driven hail before raining down all over the chamber.

Korthauvar lowered both his hands, seeming not to see that they were streaming blood and bright with glistening shards in a score of places. He'd shielded his face and throat, and that was all that mattered. "Hlael," he muttered, "get up. It's your turn to weave a farscrying. We've got to see what happened. I saw her face—she knew she hadn't enough spellfire left to disrupt that spell."

"She had enough to defend herself, surely," Hlael protested, clambering up from behind his chair.

"Yes, but she has her husband to think of and the two guards she healed earlier. She dotes on folk so easily, remember."

Hlael sighed. "She's young."

"Aye, and she'll die that way, right soon, if we don't cast just the right spells," Korthauvar declared, striding over to his scattered heap of spellbooks. "Now spin me that farscrying! I have to see what happened—now!"

Hlael nodded hastily, shook himself, and started to stammer out the spell. Korthauvar growled out wordless frustration and started flipping pages of the oldest, most powerful spell-tome he owned. Unless he was mistaken, Haelhollow was boiling with a storm of spells right now that would make a mistake at a MageFair look like a mere trifle!

The sky low over Haelhollow erupted in a sudden bright conflagration. Boiling brightness tore apart the dark cloud of descending blades like bright lantern beams slicing through nightgloom. Lightning bolts sprang out of that roiling, spraying here and there among the wagons. Men screamed as they stiffened in death, outlined in blue fire with every hair on their bodies standing out like bristles. Corpses toppled, trailing plumes of smoke, unregarded in the shout-filled confusion of tiny, dying lightnings crackling across the ground like restless claws, spiraling swords fraying away into drifting plumes of smoke, and spheres of snarling flame bouncing and tumbling out of the sky.

The brightness overhead died away swiftly, lashing out in a few parting surges. Floods of ruby and blood-pink radiance washed over trees and wagons and running men, and left strange things in their wakes.

One stunted tree tore itself up by the roots and spiraled up into the sky every bit as enthusiastically as the vanished spell-blades had been coming down. Another turned to ice and promptly began to shed branches in singing, bouncing clatterings. A third became water, crashing to the ground in a foaming flood that spat short-lived, licking flames at the air as it drained away. A wagon turned bright green and glowed. The trader on its perch stared down at his green-glowing hands in disbelief, then fled in howling terror.

Like a frantic wind he raced past a merchant frozen forever

in mid-stumble, a motionless body turned to something akin to sparkling stone. It changed again as Shandril scrambled up to stare at it, becoming a man-shape made of coiled and hissing groundsnakes.

The pillar of writhing, thankfully harmless creatures promptly collapsed into slithering chaos, causing several guards to snarl fearful, astonished oaths and flee from the wriggling, hurriedly dissipating groundcarpet of snakes.

"Down, Shan!" Narm snapped, catching hold of Shandril's arms, hurling himself to the floorboards and swinging her up and over him as he fell. With a startled mew she tumbled into the depths of the ready-wagon as the perch exploded into deadly splinters and sight-searing brightness. Narm bounced down the wagon on his back and elbows, lacking the breath to even hiss curses, as the spell that had sought their lives died away—and the wagon was rocked by another blast that was very loud and very near.

Something bloody that had been alive a moment ago tore through the fabric above the wooden wagon-sides and on out through the cloth on the other side of the ready-wagon, slowing not a whit.

"What—?" Shandril demanded a little dazedly, as she slithered down a collapsing heap of tarpaulins and small kegs of axle grease, to join Narm on the littered floor. "Who's trying to kill us now?"

"Nay, nay—who's not trying to kill us now?" Narm snapped, cradling her in his arms. "They've all gone battle-crazed out there! I don't know who tried that spell of blades or who broke it with that cloud of lightnings that went all wild, but every last merchant with a wand and every hiddencloak wizard in this caravan is trying to deal death this very Mystra-blessed moment!"

A weird high singing sound was rising over his words, pierced by many screams and shouts, and through the gaping hole where the perch had been Shandril saw an entire wagon whirling up into the sky. Vicious cracklings and

flashes of light marked the unleashings of other magics all around them, and the thuds of running boots sounded on all sides, peppered with oaths and the occasional clang of sword upon sword.

"Narm," Shandril said, struggling free of her husband's grasp, "I've got to see." She rolled over beneath him to crawl to where the perch had been.

"Nay, lady love," Narm protested, catching her by the elbows and throwing his full weight onto her back, to pin her to the floorboards again, "stay down, and quiet—and mayhap alive, hey?"

Shandril sighed, growled at him, shook her head to get a tangle of hair out of her eyes, and said firmly, "Look, every last masked Zhent wizard along on this run knows exactly which wagon we're in, and—"

The world erupted just outside to their right, and the ready-wagon was suddenly turning over around them, raining down rope-ends and hand-kegs and any number of small, hard, pointed things on Narm and Shandril as they shouted, tried to catch hold of each other, and—

Another blast drove away all vision for a moment, brightness flaring blindingly before their eyes. Shandril's ears rang. Narm was shouting something, but she couldn't tell what.

She shook her head, still seeing nothing but brightness as the ready-wagon landed with a bone-shaking crash, bounced, bounced again to the sounds of things breaking, and rocked to a halt on its side. Every last loose thing inside the wagon crashed teeth-numbingly down to its own resting-place, Narm and Shandril included.

Resting places that would last only until the next spell-blast. Bursts of magic and shouts were still raging outside as Shandril blinked her way back to seeing things . . . she hoped. She shifted gingerly amid the heap of tumbled and broken gear and couldn't help but moan in pain. Were her left shoulder and right thigh shattered or did they just feel that way?

From somewhere lower down Narm hissed, "Shan, are you all right? Keep low-voiced, and lie still!"
"Lying still," Shandril gasped into the blurred, darkening world around her, "is something I could probably master about now. I... I think nothing's broken." She moved her arm with some difficulty, shifting several coils of rope that were lying atop it, and started to laboriously walk her fingers down her own flank, toward her thigh.
Halfway there her fingertips encountered something wet and sticky. The smell told her it was her own blood even before she found the tangle of torn garment and ruined skin beneath. She hissed in pain, set her teeth, and called up spellfire.
Amid its tingling she felt other places on her body that were wet and somehow ... cold, even as the spellfire rose to warm the rest of her.
Narm groaned, deep in his throat, and she asked swiftly, "Are you hurt?"
"Ughh. My bruises have bruises of their own, as Torm once said," he muttered, "but nothing bad. Lie quiet!'
"'She died quietly'? Is that what you want to carve on my headstone?" Shandril gasped in amused protest, as spellfire washed through her, soothing and healing.
"Nay, I was hoping your remembrance would be something more like, 'Beloved of the gods, she saw two centuries, and her twenty children gave her seven-score grandchildren, who in turn—"'
"Twenty children? Narm, you rutting boar!"
"A man can hope," came the reply, in a voice of morose self-pity
Shandril snorted. "If it's to be Candlekeep platitudes, here's an appropriate one: 'Keep your hopes to a size you can carry/ Are we finished lying still and silent yet?"
A spell-blast outside promptly rocked the wagon, and something inside with them broke and collapsed into small, clattering fragments. "Nay," Narm replied brightly, "I think

not."
A thump outside was followed by a creaking of torn wood, and then a rough voice said, "This was the spellfire-wench's wagon. Quick, now!"
A dark form shouldered forward, scraping leather-clad shoulders on the side of the wagon now serving as a ceiling. It was followed by another, who spoke again in that rough voice. "D'ye see her?"
The man in leathers leaned forward, looming over the tangle of ropes where Shandril lay. Reflected daylight gleamed along the edge of a long, cruelly curved dagger. The man plucked aside the shattered ribs of a keg—and stared right into the eyes of the maid from Highmoon.
"Aww," Shandril complained, blinding him with a short gout of spellfire, "and I was lying so quietly, too!"
The man staggered back with a roar and fell over as Narm hamstrung him neatly from below.
"Why, you little vixenF the rough-voiced man snarled, raising hands upon which rings flashed with awakened magic. "I'll—"
"You'll die, that's what you'll do!" another voice said calmly from just outside the wagon. A burst of green flames outlined the rough-voiced man in sudden, convulsed agony. Burning, he fell forward on his face without a sound, revealing to Shandril a sudden scorched vista of daylight where wagon-timbers had melted away before those green flames.
A man in robes was standing outside, his hand still raised from hurling his spell. Three grim-looking men in leather armor were clustered around him, looking nervously in all directions and clutching swords in whitening, helpless fists. No blade could defend them against the restless spells warring on all sides.
Warriors and merchants alike had swords and daggers and even stools in their hands as they ran. Some hacked at everyone within reach, and others aimed wands or fists that

winked with rings.
Shandril saw the sky suddenly vomit forth whirling blades in a short-lived swirl that shredded a man spurring a horse among the wagons, then diced the horse, too. A ghostly dragon's head as high as eight men reared up into the sky, jaws gaping wide—but then collapsed and blew away as two blades met in the chest of the wizard who'd spun it. Sudden pillars of flame struck from the sky to immolate screaming warriors, and a lone crossbow quarrel sprouted in a man's head and snatched him from his feet, sword and dagger spilling from dead hands as he fell from view.
Ignoring all this tumult, the man who'd hurled green flame bowed smoothly to Shandril.
"Lady Shessair," he said pleasantly, "you may have noticed me earlier as Nargalarr the pot-seller, a somewhat half-witted man. Know that I am in truth the wizard Praulgar, and I desire to defend you against all who would take spellfire from y—"
A dagger flashed end-over-end past the nose of one of Praulgar's guards, and burst into nothingness against an unseen shield—but the dagger that spun in its wake sped right through where the exhausted shield had been, and bit through the wizard's throat.
Praulgar staggered, choking on blood, clutched at his throat, and took a few helpless, failing steps, his face suddenly pleading with Shandril as he struggled to speak . . . and managed no more than a bubbling scream.
"You'll defend no one, Zhentarim," said the man who'd hurled the dagger, striding into view with a sword ready in his hand. There was a second man at his elbow, and together they glared at the wizard's guards.
"D'you want to die, too?" the newcomer asked them softly.
The nearest guard shook his head, turned, and drove his sword firmly through the dying wizard. Praulgar- slid forward off that darkly glistening blade into a boneless heap on the ground.

"Nay," the guard replied, "not now you've rid us of this tyrant. We'll begone. Tymora smile on all!" He backed a few hasty steps away from the newcomers and then turned and fled, the other wizard's guards with him.

The two newcomers promptly buried their swords in the fallen Zhentarim, just to make sure, and gave Shandril smiles that were meant to be reassuring. "Well met, lady," one said in a deep voice. "I'm Brasker, and this is Holv—"

Shandril sighed and fed them both spellful—short, swift jets, right at their eyes.

Her aim was improving. Screaming, they staggered back, blindly slashing empty air with their swords. Brasker promptly tripped over fallen wagon gear, and Narm sprang up out of the wreckage, dagger gleaming, and pounced on the man. Setting his teeth, he stabbed down, hard.

Shandril struggled for breath, shuddering. She had almost no spellfire left, yet it tugged at her, calling for more of her, trying to pull her into oblivion in its wake.

Feeling empty and weak, she swayed, mastered herself, and sighed, "From the Zhentarim to the Cult of the Dragon. You were right, love—we should have gone on playing dead longer." She looked around the ruined wagon, largely so she wouldn't have to watch Narm clambering forward to gingerly slay Holvan, and sighed again. " 'Twouldn't have worked, though," she added sadly. "They've torn this wagon apart around us."

Narm came back toward her, pale-faced and gasping, bloody dagger in hand, and was promptly sick all over the split and splintered remains of a water-cask. "I-I—sorry, Shan, I—"

"Don't ever be sorry you're not good at slaying," she told him gently. "I hate it just as much as you do. I'll never be good at battle-tactics and lures and being ruthless and all that—and still this fire Mystra gave me eats men I should be fleeing screaming from, and I slaughter them in their tens and dozens." She shivered and managed a weak smile, putting her hand on his arm.

Narm drew in a deep, shuddering breath, nodded, and tried to smile. Someone shouted—a short, desperate, cut-off cry—and he looked back over his shoulder.

He couldn't tell who'd just died or who'd slain them. Several wagons were burning, and others lay scattered in shards and ashes, blown apart by this magic or that.

Narm shook his head, felt around in the wrack at his feet for a leather water-flask, and asked, "Why don't we find ourselves a wagon that's still intact and go play dead there?"

Shandril smiled slowly. "As Torm might put it: you say the sweetest things."

Narm winced, took a swig of water, and crouched low as magic flared out from behind a wagon. Small, sizzling balls of flame streaked across trampled, body-strewn Haelhollow at someone else, for once.

"On the other hand," he gasped, sitting down hastily amid the wreckage, "we could far more convincingly play dead right here!"

His lady burrowed through the tumbled heap of gear like a small whirlwind, hooting with laughter, to put warm arms around him.

Arauntar trotted into view, breathing hard and drenched in too much blood for it all to be his own. He held a drawn, dripping sword in either hand, and looked grim and dangerous. Peering at the heap of shattered gear, he scowled at the giggling mirth rising from it, and growled, "That's all we need! Dead men everywhere, a dozen wagons wrecked or gone, an' now the lass has gone mind-shattered on us!"

He glared at the sky. "A crazy woman with spelltire! Mystra, forgive me, but I really don't recall doing something so bad to you that I deserved this!"

The heap of wreckage surged with wild, redoubled laughter, and this time, helplessly, a second, slightly deeper voice joined in.

Shaking his head and growling, Arauntar waded forward into the hulk of the ruined ready-wagon.
"Dead Dragons preserve!" Thoadrin cursed softly, watching spells flash and men hack at each other—and more than one wagon cartwheel up into the sky, almost lazily shedding goods and merchants and harness. The ground shook as spell-blasts spat men and horses away into the Blackrocks like so many torn and dirty rags. More men came boiling out of nigh every wagon with wands leveled or rings winking on their hands or spells snarling from their lips.
The few Cult warriors who'd survived Shandril's attack to cower behind spellfire-scorched rocks with Thoadrin all gaped at the spellstorm below. Not a few of them drew back and cast him quick glances, as if judging the best time or chance to flee.
"We retreat when / give the order," he told them softly and held up a last cocked and loaded crossbow where they could see it. "Fleeing the Way can be so dangerous...."
One of his men looked at him, then at a knob of rock where spellfire had melted away a height like a small turret, leaving nothing of the four men who'd been crouching behind it but dark, greasy smears on stone. "So dangerous," he echoed, and laughed bitterly.
Thoadrin gave him a stony look but put the crossbow down again, unflred.
When the cursing priest of Bane ducked into the shelter of the dark, silent, horseless wagon bearing the sign that said "Haransau Olimer's Best Blandreths," a quick glance was enough to reassure him that it stood empty. Any number of black-armored men might be lying still and flat on their faces amid all the blandreths, of course, but nothing moved, and he could hear no breathing but his own—great loud gasps that told the watching world Stlarakur of Bane was terrified, unaccustomed to hastening anywhere, and in need of a little time to catch his wind before hastening anywhere else.

Stlarakur of the Zhentarim wasted a little of his precious wind in a muttered, heartfelt flood of curses that branded Bane the cause of the bloodshed, affray, and ruin raging all around the wagon—and Bane's response to such an insult was swift and sure.

The shadows behind the wagon-curtain grew an arm with a blandreth clutched on the end of it—an arm that swung around in a vicious arc.

The dull, wet thud of Stlarakur's skull shattering was echoed by just as damp a splattering of Zhentarim brains on the wagon wall. The priest fell heavily to the floorboards, writhed in a momentary convulsion, and fell limp forever.

"Well met," the shadow murmured, bending down to wipe the blandreth clean on dark robes. "Rejoice in the holy thought, priest, that you are but the latest victim of the Dark Blade of Doom."

Marlel snorted in wry amusement at his own ridiculously overblown words and started to nudge the corpse off his wagon with the toe of his boot. He thought better of it and left the Zhent lying with one arm dangling over the edge, to discourage others from seeing the dark wagon entrance as a handy refuge. .

With his horses gone in someone's dark necromancy and slaughter everywhere, it was a good time for Marlel to lie low, awaiting a better, later chance at snatching spellfire. He dragged Olimer's most comfortable seat to a better location for watching the battle outside the wagon," uncorked another bottle of Olimer's best firestorm, and sat down to enjoy the rest of the show.

"Are you well, lord?"

Aumlar Chaunthoun bit back a sudden wild urge to shriek at the man—of course he was a dolt; he was a Zhentilar guardsman, wasn't he?—and said curtly, "I fare very well, and require only privacy. Just the two of you see to keeping everyone out of this wagon, so that interruptions disturb me not!'

He lay back down on his improvised bed of blankets and closed his eyes again, trying to pay attention to the whispering thoughts in his mind. His spell seemed to be yielding snatches of both Narm's and Shandril's thinking, but with all mind-images, the remembered faces and places and what items looked like, leached out...

Drifting down to the murmuring ... yes, here ...

[elation] Mystra's blessing flowing back into me need it soon sure [alarm] what if it drowns my control, takes me over? what then? Oh gods what then?

[contentment] Shan happy again even in all this just to hold her just to feel her close warm soft that lovely smell love you lady love you

[worry] less control each time now but they don't stop attacking they'll never stop attacking

[apprehension] she's tense again she's worrying I wish she'd rest easy but no mayhap she feels something I can't

knows something's coining feels a foe near "Shan?"

The mageling was speaking again—and as dreamwhis-pers always did, the mind-murmurs went thunderous, echoing, and distorted when someone spoke aloud. Aumlar winced and tried to endure through the shouting without letting go his attention and losing hold of the interwoven thoughts.

Bah! He'd lost them again. His spell wasn't ended, but he'd fallen out of the right reverie, his awareness thrust back to the here and now of Aumlar Chaunthoun lying flat on his back in this wagon, with spells still whistling and roaring and bursting outside, men screaming, and a single floating eye regarding him from the darkness above, near the wagon ceiling. A floating eye staring at him?

Aumlar thrust himself up, snatching at the hilt of his best enspelled dagger, trying to reach the spying orb before it—

—winked out, that white glistening regarding him one moment and utterly gone the next, the gloom of the wagon roof unbroken again, defying him with its own dark mockery.

Panting with fury, his dagger drawn with no one to thrust it

into, Aumlar glared around at the empty darkness, saw nothing at the entrance but the lazily leaning shoulders of his two helm-headed guards, and slashed wildly at the air where the eye had been, knowing as he did it that his attack was futile. He should burrow into his lockchest, get out the right tome, and cast a tracing spell—but 'twas already too late, and he'd have to let the dreamwhisper go, and ...

"Blood of Mystra!" he cursed, snatching up his blankets and stalking to a far corner of the wagon, in case whoever had been spying on him sent a spell from afar to stab down at where he'd been lying. Who could it have been, anyway?

Hmmph! In this caravan, who couldn't it have been?

Shaking out his blankets in a savage temper, he kicked aside chests and coffers to clear space enough to lie down again, wondering darkly just which rival might be lurking near. Perhaps if he spun a spell-disguise and got himself to somewhere safe where he could watch who came calling on this wagon while still listening to the thoughts of the spellfire-wench and her ma—

There was a sudden flash from the wagon entrance, a high, thin scream, and the head of the worst dullard of his two guards came bouncing wetly down the wagon toward him.

With a snarl of revulsion and fear Aumlar whirled to face - the light, springing sideways out of long habit as he did so.

His feet came down in a hard yet slippery confusion of chests and coffers even as his shoulder slammed bruisingly into the wagon side—but the stabbing blade of shimmering magic drove through nothing but air where he'd been and faded before it could sweep sideways and reach him.

His attacker cursed softly and asked, "You weren't particularly fond of these Zhentilar, were you? I'd hate to upset you unduly, Chaunthoun. Your clear head and unfettered judgment are such assets to Manshoon's little Brotherhood of tail-biting vipers."

The somehow familiar voice came from behind a slowly advancing wall of drifting silver sparks, a spell every bit as

deadly as the spellblade that had slain the guards. Aumlar eyed its inexorable promise of doom and sighed. He should know that voice.

The lure he'd prepared to overwhelm Shandril Shessair had to be used now, on this more immediate foe—or there wouldn't be another night or day beyond that, or any more of either days or nights, for Aumlar Chaunthoun. Oh, Blood of Mystra indeed!

He murmured the word that sprang the trap, sprang back across the wagon, and in midair said aloud, as recognition came to him at last: "Pheldred!"

"In full glory! Well met again, Aumlar, after all these years. I've come to pay you back for maiming me."

"Of course—if you can," the Zhentarim told his unseen attacker calmly. "It must be hard to win respect in the ranks of the Red Wizards when your arms keep changing into manacles. My best curse; how did you manage to break it?"

"The same way you set it. The hard part was finding what fiend you'd bound into it and by what names I could command it. I went through years of torment for that, Aumlar. Now, so will you!"

"I think not," the Zhentarim snapped, as the first of his wands rose into view and fired, its burst shredding Pheldred's deathwall spell and revealing the floating man behind it. Dark hair, glittering black eyes, dark maroon robes, two plain finger-rings of course, a dagger and a whip thrust through a richly made belt... nothing unexpected there. Good; the Red Wizard was right inside the wagon. He could feel those crackling shieldings around Pheldred, so they couldn't be illusory. Right in—as the old, old saying put it—the very jaws of his trap.

Aumlar smiled as wands that obeyed his will rose into view on all sides of the Thayan, and began to fire.

Shields flared instantly into wailing brightness around the floating wizard, who sneered. "Really, Aumlar, is that the best you can do? I expected rather more than this from such

a widely feared flower of the Zhentarim!"
A shield failed with a sound like shattering crystal, followed by the one beneath it.
Aumlar spread his hands and replied mockingly, "Pray accept my apologies, Pheldred. These feeble efforts of mine were intended to punish but not slay a young lass untutored in magic. If you'd announced your arrival, I'd have prepared something more suitable, but perhaps my paltry wands are about right for dealing with a Red Wizard? There goes another of your shields, and—oh, my—another!"
The Thayan snarled, his dark eyes snapping with anger, as his third and fourth shieldings collapsed. His hands were moving in the gestures of a spell Aumlar didn't recognize, but the Zhentarim did not intend to stand still and be blasted. He started to clamber and walk through the scattered goods along one wall of the wagon, aiming to get around Pheldred to the entrance, where he could control when his unwanted guest departed. With even a shred of blessing from Mystra, he could end this menace from his past without even losing his dreamwhisper spell, and—
The Mystra he'd just cursed. Umh. Ah, well...
Grinning fiercely, Pheldred finished his spell just as another of his shieldings disintegrated. Those that were left expanded sharply outward, hurling back the beams of the wands in spark-spitting chaos.
Smoke arose from at least one singed carry-bag on the wagon floor, but Aumlar was too busy worrying about the Thayan's magic to see which bag it was. Pheldred's spell wasn't just a new set of shields, it was something that sought to drink in the ravages of his wands and twist their energies to forge another spellblade, this one shimmering longer and larger and brighter already.
One of Aumlar's wands burst with a tiny "pop," like a candle snuffed by an overenthusiastic servant. A thread of smoke trailed up from its splintered end. There was no sign of the explosion that might have turned the wagon into a crypt for

both wizards. Pheldred must have drained it, and—
Another wand died, and the Red Wizard's smile widened. Aumlar was almost between him and the entrance, now, but the Thayan showed no signs of alarm or of movement beyond turning in midair to face his foe. His hands were moving again.
Aumlar's face tightened, and he bent his will to calling forth everything from the wands. Even the spellfire-wench couldn't handle much power flowing into her too swiftly, and if Pheldred was going to drain them all anyway ...
The floating wizard started to glow, and his spellcasting gestures faltered and stiffened in pain. Aumlar gave him back his own fierce, cruel smile, delighting in the first signs of pain and doubt in those dark, glittering eyes.
"Zhentarim dog!" Pheldred spat, his spell finished.
"Thayan worm," Aumlar replied mockingly, stepping swiftly sideways again. There had been no flash or crash yet, and he wasn't sure what this latest spell was supposed to accomplish—but in case it struck more swiftly than the still-solidifying spellblade, he didn't want to be standing immobile and so offering himself to it.
Something flickered at the corner of his eye, and he leaped in the opposite direction even before turning to look at it. The Red Wizard laughed as Aumlar landed hard on a heap of coffers and a keg and scrambled hastily upright again.
This new spell was a dark, spiraling force of some kind that had brushed the wagon walls at its forming. Now it was tightening and shrinking rapidly as it spun, closing down around the only Zhentarim wizard in the wagon.
Aumlar slashed it to ribbons with three of the wands, spinning them around just for an instant to sever Pheldred's spell in three places, then sweeping them back to strike the Thayan again.
The floating Red Wizard gasped as the beams fired by the wands struck his shields once more. His body shuddered in

the flickering heart of his diminishing defenses, and he groaned aloud. Then slowly—as if fighting to do so in the gathering radiance around him—he moved his hands in the gestures of yet another spell.

Aumlar cast a quick glance back at Pheldred's dark spiral, saw its last shreds fading away, and bent all his will on searing through the Thayan's shields before Pheldred could do anything else.

The glow around the floating man flared to painful brightness, and the Red Wizard seemed to be struggling in pain or to do something he just couldn't manage. A wand burst with the sort of explosion Aumlar had been dreading, but its racing force was sucked into the crackling force racing around Pheldred, and—

The Red Wizard was suddenly spinning across the wagon, - screaming in pain, as bright, forces rushed everywhere, struck the wagon walls like waves crashing on rocks, and came racing back again to shock together in the bright heart of nothingness.

Pheldred was gone, teleported away to somewhere safer, scorched and hopefully worse. Aumlar Chaunthoun flung himself to the floorboards as magical forces snarled and fought above him, and prayed loud and long to Mystra for his deliverance, pleading for divine forgiveness for his every slighting oath and careless transgression .. . while the back of his robes smoldered and melted away, his hair sizzled, and the top of his wagon quietly ceased to be.

The day might belong to raging Tempus the Wargod, but Mystra certainly seemed to be listening attentively today.

FIERCE MAGIC BEYOND WITHSTANDING

We warriors burn and pillage and plunder what we can reach, but when wizards make war, all Faerun stands in harm's way.

Ortharros of Zazesspur

Bright Banner Above Me: A Swordlord's Life
Year of the Turning Wheel

"It's past time for pretending to sell spices," Malivur said softly, his green eyes gleaming back the blazing fire of the scene in the depths of his scrying-whorl.

The ginger-bearded seller of clockworks nodded. "In this, we're agreed. He's weak and not looking to see who strikes at him while those flames rage. There'll be no better time. 'Tis best for the Cult, and us two—and all civilized Faerun—if Aumlar Chaunthoun goes down into dust and darkness right now."

"Then stand back, Krostal! Thereafter, move not and say nothing," the dark-robed wizard snapped. "For the greater glory of the Dead Dragons, let him die now!"

The Cult thief nodded and retreated a few swift, smooth steps down the wagon before crouching to watch.

"Mystra guide me," Malivur breathed, and carefully began to cast one of his best spells.

Krostal's hands drifted to the hilts of both his throwing-knives, loosened them, and settled into comfortable grips—just in case.

He smarted from minor burns in a dozen places, and the roofless ruin of his wagon was afire, plumes of smoke rising all around him. "Aumlar Chaunthoun, mighty mage," he mocked himself in a whisper as he crawled to the small, nondescript coffer that held a precious healing potion—and his last and most precious items of magic.

He'd been saving them for a dark and dire time . . . like right now. This caravan was a-crawl with mages, sorcerers, fell priests, and the gods alone knew what else, and the demise of one Aumlar of the Zhentarim would give great satisfaction to many of them. His fellows in the Brotherhood would probably be the most delighted of all.

So it would not do to be noticed in his weakness just now. Not until—

The air behind him surged into a sudden, rising roar, and

Aumlar flung himself forward in frantic haste, snatching up the coffer and diving out of the wagon without even looking to see what hostile magic had erupted. Pheldred, no doubt, returning to—

He hit the ground hard on an already bruised shoulder and rolled, kicking out to keep himself moving and letting his tumble carry him around to the left. If that spell flared out in a straight path ...

He managed to cradle the coffer from damage and come to a twisted halt facing his wrecked wagon. Breathing hard against the coffer—clutched to his chest like a breastplate—Aumlar stared at a cloud of emerald radiance that was whipping through where he'd been in a rising, howling spiral. A whirlwind of bones—no, teeth, the fangs of myriad beasts—slashed and shredded cloaks, weather-covers, and chests alike inside that eerie glow.

The Cult of the Dragon! Well, it could be a Malarite spell, too, but what interest would the howling beast-lovers have in—never mind. The rotting Gamepiece Carvers Guild of Tharsult might put in an appearance working war against this caravan! Everyone was after spellfire, and—

The emerald whirlwind abruptly lifted from its slow, methodical destructive drift across the wagon floor and tumbled out its riven front, heading straight for him!

Whoever was behind that spell must be able to see him! With trembling fingers Aumlar tore open the coffer, hastily thrust the two wands it held through his belt, snatched out the stopper of the potion flask and drained it in choking haste, then plucked up the ring that should spin him a shielding to withstand all but... spellflre.

That thought was still bright and bitter in his brain as the keening of the whirlwind rose before him. the ring settled home onto his shaking middle finger. It crumbled away to nothing, its enchantment somehow fled.

For a moment Aumlar just stared at it, numbly unable to believe that his long-cherished magic was gone, now when

he most needed it. The green glow fell upon him, dust stung his hands and cheeks, making his eyes water.

He was going to die! Here and now, not in his own richly appointed crypt in his own kingdom somewhere centuries hence when his last age-defying potion failed, but right now, unless—

The dream whisper! Yes!

He could use it as an anchor! Stumbling backward to buy himself the handful of seconds he needed, Aumlar closed his eyes and firmly forced his will down, down to the right reverie. Seize on the thoughts of those two, and snatch himself to them. 'Twould cost him the link itself and the most powerful of his long-prized stored magics and would take him not all that far from these whirling bones, but to remain here was certain death, and if he could run nimbly enough once he was face to face with young Lady Spellflre, perhaps he could .. .

Ah! He found and seized on the increasingly familiar "voice" of Narm Tamaraith's mind and rode a rueful thought about being grateful for Arauntar's arrival and at the same time wishing the Harper—Harper? Bane ride Mystra, but the watching gods above must be laughing themselves sick at all this entertainment!—had chosen some other time to wade in, just when Shan's lips were closing hungrily on his, and she was so soft and warm against him . . .

Well, it was nice to know someone besides the gods was enjoying themselves in this, Aumlar thought savagely as there was a flash of green radiance and the world around him changed.

He was standing in a ruined wagon that was nowhere more than waist-high—larger than the one he'd left, which should be right over there—yes, with an emerald whirlwind now tossing up ragged bodies of dead guards and merchants as it quested this way and that for him, in vain.

Here, smashed casks and coffers were everywhere, tumbled and fallen amid swirled cloaks and draperies. The magic of

his own arrival and the dying dreamwhisper were snarling and crackling around him as short-lived, stabbing fingers of lightning.

The head of the guards, that great foul-mouthed swaggering brute called Rauntar or some such name, was standing amid the wreckage not three paces away—frozen in silence with eyes staring and mouth open wide, Aumlar's lightnings playing around his battered armor.

Aumlar snatched at his belt, trying to get out a wand. He wasn't going to be in time.

The man took one stride toward him, reaching out for Aumlar with a large, hairy hand. His eyes flickered and went dark, he let out a long, whistling groan, and toppled over into the wreckage with a crash.

The Zhentarim gasped with relief. The guard was lying quite still, sprawled on tumbled rope and hand-kegs. So where were the two lovebirds and the Harper?

Was Tymora going to be whimsical enough to let him get clear away?

No. Of course not. Something was stirring in the clutter beyond the fallen guard. Oh, gods—spellflre!

Aumlar spun around to flee and found his way blocked by a heap of casks that would undoubtedly crash down atop him and roll if he blundered into them. He turned back again in time to see a debris rise up like a wave, scattering pans and ladles in all directions. The whirlwind of fangs was moving nearer, and there was no escape from it except right through whoever was now clawing their way free of—

A man's hand! This must be Narm! Aumlar set his teeth and charged. If he could just bowl the lad over and keep going, to get clear before Shandril—wherever she was— scorched him, he could—

A last fold of cloak was wrenched aside when Aumlar was a bare running stride away, and he stared right into the wild eyes of a tousle-haired, alarmed-looking Narm Tamaraith. With a snarl, he kept right on going.

Narm flung himself aside, knowing that a tangle of lanterns and iron-shod lantern tripods lay behind him amid the tangled weathercovers. He wasn't quite sure why the usually smiling carver of pipes was charging at him, but it seemed likely that Norlaund the Finecarver was just one more wizard after spellfire.

The robed man smashed into the iron lanterns and tripod poles with a solid crash, winding himself and recoiling into a gasping stagger. Narm kicked the man's legs out from under him, and Norlaund slammed facedown onto the floorboards, bouncing dazedly nose-to-nose with Shandril, who was crouching under several cloaks close enough for him to touch.

Narm didn't give the man a chance to lay a finger on Shandril. He put his boot as hard as he could into the man's face, snapping the carver's head back and spattering blood in all directions from a shattered nose, and grabbed hold of the man's belt and tried to heave him away.

Aumlar was too heavy, and Narm overbalanced and crashed down on top of him, rolling over in time to see what was making Shandril gasp, "Oh, gods, I don't like the look of that!"

An advancing whirlwind of teeth and talons was spinning around and around in a towering, emerald-green cloud, shredding the bodies of dead men as it came. It was heading right toward their wagon!

The wizard thrust himself upward, spitting curses and tumbling Narm into some coffers. "Little bastard mageling!" he hissed, eyes blazing. "You're going to die!" His hands stabbed down at his belt.

Where Narm could see at least two wands. He snatched up a shattered lantern and hurled it into the wizard's face.

The mage stumbled back, slipping on the clutter underfoot, and Narm launched himself forward.

Shandril came boiling up out from under her cloaks, forcing Aumlar to turn to face her, his hand rising with a

wand in it. Narm smashed into him, driving him back into the tripod poles with a clattering crash.
The impact sent fire through Aumlar's elbow, and he almost dropped the wand. Snarling, he snatched it with his other hand and whirled to fire it right into Narm's face—
Just as Narm's boot, driven with all the force the young mage could put behind it, slammed into Aumlar's crotch. The two men fell heavily onto shifting coffers and the last of the tripod poles, the Zhentarim emitting a scream that was really more of a strangled chirp of pain. Narm snatched a wand from the wizard's belt, tossed it to Shandril, and grabbed with both hands at the one the finecarver was holding.
Aumlar held on grimly, so Narm punched him in the throat. As the wizard convulsed, he ended up with the second wand. The keening of the whirlwind was very close now, and Narm took it to Shandril rather than daring to throw it.
His lady thanked him with a look, her hair whipping around her and her face as white as bone. The first wand he'd given her was already glowing in her grasp, tiny flames racing around it and up her arm to her shoulder, and she faced the spell of spiraling fangs and started to drain the second wand, snapping, "Narm! Get back! Behind me!"
"No!" he shouted back in sudden anger, as the gale rose around them. "You can't always be doing this alone! I'm your man—I stand with you!"
Why by all the gods were people always attacking them? Why couldn't folk just leave them alone?
"Narm, no!" Shandril cried. "I need you out of the way!"
Narm obeyed with a growl, wading and clambering through heaped coffers until he stood just behind her. The
whirlwind was already shredding the front boards of the wagon with a shriek and moving hungrily nearer.
The finecarver lay still in the wreckage in front of Shandril, as she stood facing the whirlwind. From somewhere a crossbow bolt came racing at her—only to be caught in the

spell-winds and whirled up into the sky.
Narm wondered desperately what magic he could use to help her, knowing the answer was "none at all." For lack of anything better to do, he drew his dagger, watching Shandril anxiously.
First one wand, and then the other crumbled into dust that fell away between her fingers into the air. Shandril opened a mouth that had spellfire raging in it and shrieked, "No! Once and forever, nooooo!"
Spellfire roared forth like raging waters bursting a dam. The bright flood of flame thundered into the whirlwind and overwhelmed it, streamers of spellflame spinning off in all directions for a few deadly moments ere the emerald radiance was quenched and scoured out of the air, spellfire racing away from it to curve into a nearby wagon, which exploded with a
roar.
Malivur and Krostal of the Cult of the Dragon were hurled high into the air with spellfire raging through them. They screamed as they died, but Malivur's face wore an expression of excited awe before it burst apart... awe at the feel of more raw, raging power than he'd thought possible.
Shandril was screaming now, too. She stood with arms stretched wide and mouth agape, spellfire still roaring forth from her, and her entire body shook and wavered as if clawed by a mighty gale.
As Narm watched, her feet rose off the smoldering floorboards as the torrent of spellflame roared on. She hung in the air, body arched like a star, spellfire streaming from her in a great swath of devouring flames.
That fire raced across Haelhollow, devouring everything in its path, tumbling wagons for an instant before they disintegrated and swallowing all else whole.
Shandril turned her head toward him, and streams of spellfire raced out from her eyes. Narm sprang back, and she looked away hastily, tears of fire streaming down her cheeks.

"Narm!" she screamed. "Help me! Help meee!"
"How, Shan?" he cried, running up as close to her as he dared. She hung in the air above him, and it seemed to him as if she was struggling to bring her arms toward each other, to point ahead of her. The rocks across the hollow were melting away into nothingness, trees collapsing into the conflagration without a sound.
"I—" Shandril was crying openly now, shaking her head. Streams of flame leaked from her eyes as cried, "I—I can't control it! The spellfire is—eating me! Taking me awayyyy!"
She hung in the air, weeping bitterly ... and suddenly she was flying, as Narm gaped up at her and wondered what by all Mystra's grace he was going to do.
His lady soared across Haelhollow on a jet of spellfire, her arms shaping and directing her streams of flame once more, lofting them at last up and out of the hollow, to the line of rocks where she'd struck down the crossbowmen. Those rocks vanished into smoke and dust, followed by more trees behind them.
Narm shook his head in despair and did the only thing he could. He started running after Shandril, so at least he might be there when her spellfire burned out and she needed comfort and protection. He hoped he'd not be trying to catch a smoldering corpse when that moment came.
Behind him, Aumlar of the Zhentarim staggered to his feet in the waist-deep wagon clutter, wincing in pain. There! The lad who'd dealt him such agony! With a wordless snarl he raised his hands to work a slaying spell.
Something else stirred in the wrecked and tumbled gear behind the wizard. Aumlar ignored it, intent on pronouncing the first words of the incantation. That was all the time Arauntar needed to rise up, shedding coffers and scraps of cloak and broken keg-staves, and reach out. His hands went around the Zhentarim throat in front of him and tightened.
Choking, the throttled wizard started to kick and struggle, so the Harper set his teeth, brought his strength to bear, and

broke Aumlar Chaunthoun's neck.
"Aumlar's down!" Mhegras Master-of-Furs hissed, clutching the wagon-flap so tightly that his knuckles went white.
" 'Down' as in dead?" Sabran the Weaver asked calmly.
"Yes!" Mhegras snarled, shaking his head and then dropping the flap and turning to face the priest of Bane. "Gods, what a slaughter! That's three Dragon Cultists at least, and five of the Brotherhood gone! They're dropping like buzzflies at first frost out there!"
Sabran shrugged. "If spellfire was easy to take, Lord Manshoon would have had it long since and none of us would be out here in these wolf-prowled wilderlands, clawing at each other. I won't be surprised if the Red Wizards, the Arcane Brotherhood, and half a dozen lesser cabals have their agents in the wagons—or running around out there right now."
Mhegras shook his head again and burrowed among their things for his fourth travel-flask of ieirith-wine. Sabran watched him drink deeply of the black, salty stuff—and how does a mage of the Brotherhood come to prefer a vintage of hot, savage Mhair, anyway?—and waited for his partner's next outburst.
Mhegras wiped his mouth, restoppered the flask with a sigh, and said quietly, "Well, if they are, they're likely dead. A lot of them, anyway. That little minx is flying around on her spellfire right now, melting down every wagon and rock she looks at! There aren't going to be many guards or merchants left for them to guard, if this goes on."
"So?" the priest asked calmly.
Mhegras gave Sabran a dark look. "You were right. We take no part in this battle and go right on playing happy heads-down merchants until we've a better chance to take this Shandril." His eyes strayed to a particular coffer.
Sabran smiled. "The drugs to make her sleep are fine. The full array's unscathed; I've just checked. I doubt nightfall will bring us a good chance. Even if all this burning people

wearies the maid, there'll likely be Voldovan and his two head dogs everywhere, growling and prowling. Perhaps in Triel."
Mhegras nodded, then gave Sabran a sudden grin. "After she's cooked another dozen of our rivals, hey?"
The priest shrugged. "As tempting as I find that idea, we should do a little prowling of our own tonight. Voldovan's sure to hire guards in Triel, and Thay and the Cult both have their own eyes and ears there, awaiting our arrival."
"I've full spells ready right now," Mhegras muttered. "Tonight it is, then." He reached for the wine flask again.
"Hand of Talos!" Thoadrin swore, as another rock was suddenly smoke and dust, spellflames raging through where it had been to sear away stunted felsul trees and thornbushes alike. If there'd been any better forest here, the wench would've had it all afire already, blazing away to the horizon and choking everyone with its smoke. Instead of just strangling his warriors.
Shaking his head in grim disbelief, Thoadrin of the Cult scrambled a little way farther down from the spellflre-scorched
height of rocks. He'd watched spellfire melt away most ot tnat rampart of stone as easily as it turned Cult warriors to ashes. Even a glancing lick of spellflames had been enough to turn armor to bubbling ruin and leave the leg beneath it scorched.
Wherefore Thoadrin was limping now, and his every breath was burning pain. He dared not try to cross the road to the rocks on the other side of Haelhollow again, but there'd been no one left alive there the last time he'd checked, not unless they'd fled a good way into the wilderlands . ,. where the leucrotta and wolves and ore raiding bands were no doubt lurking and watching the fun.
Another few ridges along this side, and he'd be sure of the fates of the rest of his men. Ashes, most of them; he knew
that already.

Was he the last? Of all the hardened Dragon warriors he'd led out here?

Gods above, that one girl could deal all this death ...

Someone blackened rose up from a tangle of fire-scorched branches in front of him, sword in hand, and Thoadrin felt for his own blade.

"Easy," the man gasped." Tis me, lord: Laranthan."

Thoadrin stumbled forward, managing a grin. "You'll forgive me if I don't embrace you," he gasped, almost falling over.

Laranthan shot out a hand to steady him, and gasped, "We're the last. Spellfire comes expensive, it seems." He coughed, then, a raw, rasping anguish that would not stop as he doubled over, shaking.

Thoadrin threw his arm around his best warrior—by the Dead Dragons, his only warrior, now!—and held the man, helpless to do more, until at last the coughing ended. Laranthan went to his knees, spat out a lot of blood onto the fire-scorched rocks, drew in a few long, gasping breaths, and asked, "Could we ... get away from this place?"

"Come," Thoadrin said quietly, lifting him to his feet."'Tis trie mackrocks for us, north and west as fast as we can go."

Laranthan looked at his lord. "North and—Waterdeep?"

Thoadrin nodded. "Seeking spellfire is a fools' game, but those well above us in the Followers may not believe that, from where they sit safe and distant. So to Waterdeep to hide until the time's right to seek our masters and admit our failure."

Laranthan nodded, looked back at the drifting smoke where a long ridge of ancient and weather-scoured rocks had been, shivered, and started walking northwest.

The flying lass and her storm of all-consuming flames dwindled down behind the smoking, melted rocks along one side of the hollow. Orthil Voldovan shook his head in awe and then bellowed, "Arauntar! Beldimarr! All swords—to me/"

Was anyone left to answer his rallying?

Ah, Arauntar, lumbering forward, and someone else, past yonder wagons. . . . Voldovan stared around in mounting horror at the smoldering ruins of his caravan, muttering all the curses he could remember. A dozen wagons, at least, and probably more than twice that many clients ...

All the work of some brigands and one girl.

Distant trees crackled as spellfire roared on. Voldovan looked in that direction and growled, "Gods above, how am I going to slay her? And if I don't, how soon before that devours all the Realms?"

In the gathering dusk, Sharantyr of Shadowdale saw the flash and glow of mighty flame in the distance ahead a moment or two before the ground shook beneath her boots.

"Shan, Shan," she muttered, climbing onto Flamewind's saddle and urging the weary horse into a trot, "couldn't you have waited until I got there?"

Somewhere nearby in the Blackrocks, a wolf howled.

Her mount faltered under her, saddle leather creaking with the break in stride. Sharantyr kicked her feet out of the stirrups and murmured, "Slow, then, Flamewind. Go as slow as you want to."

The horse faltered again under her and fell.

Sharantyr sprang free, cursing softly, and watched the ground rush up to meet her like a hard-driven fist.

Her bright spellflames first began to falter just as Narm was starting to stagger from weariness, every breath burning his lungs. He'd run a long way up and down loose rocks and over tangled thorn-vines and half-fallen, leaning trees. He had lost count of the number of small, snarling things that had scurried away from beneath his pounding boots.

He felt as if he'd run halfway to Waterdeep, but when he'd slipped, caught hold of a tree to keep from falling down a dark cleft between rocks, and ended up wrenching himself back the way he'd come from ere he could halt, he could still see the fitful glows and rising sparks of the burning wagons in Haelhollow, not all that far off.

Shandril was flying lower now, struggling in the air as if wrestling with some invisible wraith, and the jets and bursts of flame were becoming fitful as her spellfire ran out or she won her battle for mastery over it. It had been some time since she'd burned a clear trail through the Blackrocks brush. Only the occasional gout of flame set anything below her to smoldering now.

Narm caught hold of another tree, clung to it while he threw back his head and drank in deep, shuddering breaths of cool twilit air, then ran on again. She wasn't far ahead now. One last sprint just might...

Shan suddenly put her hands down at her sides—balled and shaking fists, at once achingly beautiful and pitiful— and soared straight up into the sky. Windmilling his arms wildly to slow down, Narm ran right underneath her, managed to get himself stopped with the aid of a particularly thorny wintanberry bush, and wrenched himself around to face her.

"Shan!" he shouted. "Shan, I'm down here!"

The bright thing of fire wriggled in the swiftly darkening sky above him, writhing strangely against the brightening stars like a sandsnake he'd once seen burrowing into river mud, and made a horrible sound. A soft and yet harsh sound that went on and on.

Narm gaped up at his lady for a long, fearful time, wondering if the spellfire was turning Shan into some sort of monster, before he realized he was hearing bitter, mirthless laughter. She was choking out the last of her spellfire. He saw it billow from her nose and mouth like horse-breath on a cold day. Slowly she sank back to earth again, shuddering amid the last crackling, spitting eruptions of flame.

"Believe it or not," she gasped, turning to face him with eyes that blazed with spellfire, "I'd noticed you crashing along, down below. Oh, gods, Narm, I love you!"

Narm reached up his hands for her. "And I love you, Shan!"

"Do you?" She shuddered, hunching over in midair and spitting forth flames as if vomiting up a sickening meal.

"Still?"
"Yes, my lady," Narm cried, catching hold of one of her feet despite a surge of power that burned, then numbed him. "Oh, yes!"
"Then end this," she whispered. "Please."
r
Narcn dragged her down to the ground and embraced her, >ending forward to kiss her, then recoiling helplessly before ler skin-searing breath.
"W-what d'you mean?" he cried, as he staggered back, vreathed in flame, and saw his lady fall to her hands and oiees, arching and convulsing. "Shan, I'll not harm you!"
The look she gave him up through her tangled hair was :hat of an angry, hungry beast, but her voice was all weariness when she said, "Then knock me cold. Give me sleep—swiftly, with your fist—before I lose this battle raging inside me."
He ran to her. "Shan? What... what's happening to you?"
"I'm dying," she whispered. "Or will"—her voice rose into an angry snarl—"if I give in to this fire. It feels so warm, so soothing . . . and gives me such power. I want it. I want it so much!"
She quivered, head down, and he flinched back from her, inches away from putting soothing fingers to her shoulders.
"If I give in," she growled, "if I stop fighting, I'll become a flying flame, scouring everything I see like some sort of mad, leaping star come down to the ground . . . until I'm burnt out and gone." She sobbed harshly, then added in a hoarse, hissing whisper, "Gone to ashes, like all the folk I've slain!"
Her head jerked up, then, and her face was aflame and twisted. She looked like a fiend out of the Nine Hells as she stared at him and growled, "Do it, Narm! Do it, my love!"
Narm stared at her, clenched his hand slowly into a fist, and held it out to her questioningly. She nodded, lowering her face again, and snarled, "Damn you, do it!"
A roar built in her throat, and her body shook again. In

sudden fear Narm drew back his arm and drove it forward, punching his lady's jaw as hard as he'd ever struck anyone in his life. .

The force of his blow brought sharp pain to his fingers, then numbness. He shook them, absently, as he watched his lady's head snap back, the fires go out in her eyes, and her body start to crumple.

He grabbed for her too late, as her senseless body fell forward into a boneless roll that brought her to a stop against him, limp and heavy.

"Gods above," he cursed—or prayed—and started to cry. "Oh, Shan, Shan ... what am I going to do?"

Only the first few peeping insects of nightfall gave him answer, and Narm cradled his wife's body in his arms, stroking her matted and sweat-soaked hair, wondering what was going to become of them both.

If only he had the spells of an archmage or spellfire to match her own—or neither of them had ever heard of Mystra's terrible gift, and no one was chasing them across half Faerun seeking to enslave Shan or somehow wrest her power out of her. No doubt the Zhentarim and a score of other fell, cruel wizards had spells that would slay her in slow torment as crawling magic tore spellfire out of her and into their hands. Even if they didn't, they'd lock her up until they could find or craft such spells—or slay her, just to keep spellfire from falling into the hands of their foes.

And there was nothing—nothing—he could do about it. Perhaps, given years of unbroken study under a kind and capable master, he could become a mage of serviceable power—no meteor of mighty magic, but a careful caster of spells in some upcountry village where no one had ever heard of spellfire or the Zhentarim, either . . . but he wasn't going to have those years.

The jaws and claws of those who did not wish them well were closing around them now, despite all their capers and the many friends who'd aided them.

Harpers were just folks with a few secrets and a little boldness and a blade or two, not god-guarded workers of miracles. Even old Elminster couldn't be everywhere. Besides, he was more one who placed a careful word here, a crafty manipulation there, and the occasional stinging slap of a strong magic into the faces of foes when he had to. Narm could see that now.

In the end, out here in the wilderlands, they stood alone. Pray though they might, no one was going to save them. He and Shan were going to die soon at the hands of some greedy spellfire-seeker or other, and there was nothing he could do to protect his lady, or hide her, or snatch her away from all of this. He didn't even know if he'd dare to die for her or be given the chance to. If she was an angry flying ball of flame and archwizards were hurling spells at her like clouds of arrows, what by Tempus, Tymora, Azuth, and Mystra was he going to do? Stand and yell at them to stop?

He was supposed to defend his lady, to be strong enough to protect her, and all he had was a laughable handful of spells and soft hands that could give good foot-rubs!

There might even be wolves or beasts creeping closer right now, as he sat cradling Shan, and he didn't even know if he could safely carry her back to the hollow or if one of the guards would just put a blade through them both if he did.

All he could do was be with her, holding her and murmuring empty comfort.

It was different in minstrels' tales. Therein someone who had power could with a single blow or blast and a few heroic words set all the Realms to rights, cow villains into obedience, and as often as not step straight onto a throne. No ballads told of heroes, or anyone, crying tears of fire alone after cooking friends and foes and handy trees alike to ashes—yet not running out of enemies seeking spellfire from behind every second or third rock or tree or wagon. Shandril's body was growing warmer! Now what?

Narm stroked her face, her chin and throat, her hands. Yes,

warm, as if she had a fever. What if it was a fever? What happens to spellfire-folk when they get ill? He stole a gentle hand into the top of her bodice and felt down her front. Warm all over, but no warmer there than where she was bared to the night air, on face and hands. She was breathing slowly and shallowly, her face slack and empty. Hmmm.

He had no cloak to warm her with, and if he laid down to keep her warm with himself, he'd fall asleep and they'd be food for wolves or worse. He had a sudden vision of an ore spear striking down out of darkness to impale them both, pinned together to twist and scream and die, and shook his head.

Something howled, faint and very far off to the east and was answered by something else nearer. It was already cold. If he went for help, Shan would have no one, and he'd probably not be able to find her again, no matter how many folk with torches came back with him. If they came with swords, hunting her to slay, though, they'd find her soon enough. Tymora and Beshaba between them always saw to that.

"I'm not going to leave her," he whispered to himself, as he looked around at labyrinthine tangles of dark branches and moonlit rocks—then up at a sudden, throat-freezing movement, to see bats swooping across the clear night sky. Anything could be lurking out there. "Whatever happens, my death if need be, I stay."

Shan made a small sound, like a tiny, quizzical protest, and Narm crouched over her, putting his arms around her and his cheek to hers. Her skin was uncomfortably hot, now. Touching her was like putting his bare foot down on a hearthstone too close to a crackling fire.

He didn't want to make noise and attract beasts or brigands or awaken her if she was going to flare up into spellfire,

perhaps die screaming in flames that ate her before she could gather strength to quell them . . . but he wanted to comfort her, to let her feel his hands holding her, to ...

Gods, but she was hot! Moist, now, too. Sweat suddenly all

over her like dew, though she lay still and silent under him. Narm bit his lip, looking around into the close and tangled darkness. It was filled now with tiny scuttlings and whirrs of night creatures emboldened by the silence of the two humans who'd blundered so spectacularly to this spot. He wondered again what he was going to do. Or what the night was going to do to them both.

"I think she's asleep," Sabran murmured into the ear of his partner. "That leaves just this Narm dolt. Think we can take him down in silence, without waking her?"

"Easy," Mhegras muttered back, baring his teeth in an unlovely smile. "I've just the spell to—"

"No," Sabran said flatly, "no spells. I don't want magic touching her. How do we know it won't make her spellfire boil up and snatch her awake, furious and looking for whoever awakened her?"

The Zhentarim wizard scowled, flexed his fingers as if he wanted to hurl a dozen fireballs, and hissed, "So?"

"You brought your dagger, didn't you?"

"And cast the protections you ordered on us both. What're you going to—"

"Drug our little lady of flame so she doesn't waken and make fire-char of both of us. Now save your brawn and bluster. We'll be wanting to carry her far enough away from here that we can find a stream and go wading in it a good long way, to keep from being tracked come morning."

"Think of everything, don't you?"

"Just keep on learning, lad, and hold that temper down with both hands, and someday you'll think of things just as fast as I do. Possibly faster." The priest held up a hand for silence and crept forward on hands and knees. Another dozen feet or so would bring him around the last rocks, to a clear crawl downslope to where the spellfire-wench and her so-called wizard lay.

Mhegras watched Sabran go and marveled once more at the man's uncanny silence. He'd have to remember that when it

came time to kill him.
Shandril suddenly moaned, twisted, gasped something unintelligible, and thrust herself violently upward under Narm. "No," she gasped, panting as if she'd sprinted a long way, "No!"
"What is it, Shan?" Narm cried, hastily sitting back to let her rise, as she clawed at him and her voice rose almost into a shriek of terror. "Don't—don't you—"
Drenched with sweat, she stared around wild-eyed, not seeing Narm, and flung out her hands. Spellfire spat from her fingers into the night, and a sudden wash of it rolled down her shoulders and arms and away across the ground, eerie flames racing away over moss and rotting leaves and crisscrossing roots, to fade into drifting wisps of smoke.
Her gaze found him then, and she murmured, "Oh, Narm" Shaking her head, she held up her hands. Spellfire burst from her fingertips, flaring up in tiny jets. She watched them blaze for a moment, frowned, and they all sank down in unison and died.
Nodding her head, she said grimly, "It obeys me again." She drew in a deep, ragged sigh and added despairingly,
"But look how swiftly it's come back! I was drained, and now —so strong, and still building!" Unshed tears were glimmering in her eyes.
"Oh, Narm," she asked, voice quavering, "what am I going to do?"
"Bane forfend, priest—what now?"
"We creep right back to our wagon again," Sabran replied coolly, "and wait for a better chance. Unless you want to find as swift and warm a grave as all the others along on this caravan who didn't wait."
Mhegras cast a quick look back at the awakened lass through black fingers of spellnre-scorched branches that were wreathed in little plumes of smoke, and hissed, "No. Creeping back home seems very wise about now."
Sabran nodded silently and led the way, as stealthy as ever.

Still shaken, Mhegras did strictly as he'd been told earlier, keeping only a hand-length behind Sabran's boots and putting his own hands and feet just where the priest had, without complaint. On hands and knees like slinking dogs they went, down a little gully and back up its far side, over a wooded ridge where the path burned by spellfire was clearly visible amid a sharp stink of woodsmoke, and across bright, moonlit rocks to another dark gully.

The way was tricky, through many vines and branches, and not even Sabran saw two dark figures rise up behind them like shadows.

Fingers fell like steel claws on two Zhent necks, heralded by a little, terrified chirp from Mhegras.

"Oh, no, you don't—either of you. Zhent dogs."

"Who—?" Sabran choked, as fingers closed inexorably around his throat, and went on closing.

"Our names are unimportant," said a soft, rough-edged, and somehow familiar voice, from behind the gargling, squalling Mhegras.

"Aye," the man throttling Sabran agreed, and the frantically twisting priest saw the glint of teeth catching moonlight in a grin. "In fact, you can call us Arauntar an' Beldimarr"

The priest spent precious air. He had to know "Wh— why?"

"Let's just say we've been known to harp," Arauntar murmured and broke the wizard's neck.

RULED BY A MADMAN

Many a spoiled whim-driven tyrant is deemed mad, but he who listens to his dreams of "might have been" and "should have been me" is truly ruled by a madman. Let such whispers whirl away like a cap plucked off by the wind, and ride on happier. There'll be time for regrets soon enough; when they're lowering you into your grave, if not earlier.

Storm Silverhand

Heed Your Heart But Follow Your Harp

Year of the Queen's Tears

Narm eyed the ropes Arauntar and Beldimarr had bound around the untidy stack of wagon wheels and shook his head. He knew how valuable they and the axles heaped beside them were to any caravan. He might be a novice wizard who knew even less about road-travel than about magic, but to him they still looked like hazards waiting impatiently to topple and crush a certain Narm and Shandril. The alternative was for them both to sit out all day on the perch where arrows could readily find them as they bounced and rumbled along through the Blackrocks, while everyone in the caravan watched Shan struggling to hold back her spellfire. Voldovan had curtly installed them in a wagon so crammed with cargo and gear salvaged from wagons now gone—the roster of the vanished had grown frightening—that there was barely space inside for two to sit touching knee to knee, let alone lie down or try to get away from things they might set afire.

"Easy, Narm," Shandril murmured. "Stop fretting. Whatever happens will happen, without a single word or lifted finger from us."

Narm sighed." 'Tis just that I can see these crashing down and bouncing all over the place, right out onto the perch to sweep you under our wheels—and the hooves of all the beasts pulling the wagons behind!"

"Try to see less," she suggested innocently, from where she sat cross-legged at his heels, "and finish your dawnfry. Voldovan doesn't sound like he'll wait for us or anybody, angry gods included."

Narm snorted. "Does he ever sound any different? He should have been a warmaster somewhere or the tyrant of his own warrior kingdom!"

"Don't," Shandril said severely, "give him any ideas. That man can hear flies crawling on horses at the far end of the caravan!"

Narm snorted again. "A pity he hasn't the tact of a typical biting fly. I wish he did. I wish—"

He sighed, turned until their knees touched, and put his hands on her shoulders. "I wish a lot of things. I wish I was a strong, calm war-leader like Florin and an archmage as mighty as Elminster, but with Jhessail's cheerful openness. I wish neither of us had ever heard of spellfire. I wish—"

"I wish, I wish," Shandril reproved him teasingly, "does nothing but get one in trouble if the gods hear and waste the lives of those doing the wishing. Up, lord and master of my heart. Let's have our horses ready when the raging flame that's Voldovan comes snarling past."

As they rose, Narm said quietly into her ear, "Speaking of raging flame ..."

"I'm still weak," she murmured back, "and we'd probably both be dead now if Arauntar hadn't carried me back here. Prowling leucrotta and wolves don't really care what powers I might have, if I'm too asleep to keep them from tearing out my throat."

Narm winced. "You're the swaggering hero of us two, and I more the shy maid. I'm ... I'm just not made for this! I feel so —"

"Helpless?" Shandril put her arms around him. "I'd hate to share my life, my bed, my chatter time, and my dreams with some swash-booted, jaw-wagging strutter. I like the man I have, sensitive and a little bumbling. So don't turn into Torm of the Knights on me, now."

Narm snorted. "Small chance of that," he replied, "unless you remember all the lewd jokes for me."

They glanced one last time around the wagon, made sure the waterskins were handy but safely stowed, and took seats on the perch. Their familiar battered shields were ready to hand. As he hefted them to make sure neither was jammed but both were secure against the bouncing and wagon-wallowing to come, Narm glanced at his lady and said softly, "You were more than a little upset last night, love. You said some ... dark things. As if you expected to die soon."

Shandril met his gaze, her eyes calm. "I do. If I lose mastery

over my own body again, I might even welcome death."
Narm shuddered. "I—this is so sudden, talk like this from you. Where's the lass who blasted beholders and Zhentarim like an army of archmages? Who set out in a fury to slay Manshoon?"
Shandril put her hand on his. "She slipped away some time ago. Every day changes us all, but it changes me more swiftly than most, and I fear I haven't much time left. If each of our lives is a candle, mine gets plunged into forgefires daily and melts away like butter in the sun."
Narm opened his mouth to say something and found that he could think of no words at all. Shandril leaned forward and kissed him, softly and deeply. As her tongue probed his, he felt heat and just a smarting trace of flame.
She drew her mouth away but kept her face close to his, their noses almost touching, and said urgently, "Narm, please don't let us waste time in strife. I may not have much time left. I know this bewilders you, my talking like this, but—hear me: Just a day ago, I could feel cool breezes on my skin, rough wood, or the stubble on your chin under my fingertips. Now all I feel is pain."
She looked away, to where the distant shouting figure of the caravan master was striding along the line of wagons, and shivered. "Pain," she added softly, "and the constant surging of spellfire rising in me. I'm going to explode soon or scorch half the Realms. Perhaps both."
Korthauvar Hammantle ran long, weary fingers through his hair. "If I hadn't hurled that spell..."
Hlael smiled crookedly. "Our spellfire-lass might be dead now, but more than a score of merchants and Voldovan's caravan guards would still be alive."
"Hurrh. A good half of them were acting for the Red Wizards or the Arcane of Luskan or the Cult, anyway."
"Or our Brotherhood. I'd say you thinned the ranks of dangerous Scornubrian loyal-to-cabals skulkers for a good month at least. Your spell worked, the wench lives, and—

who's left, of Voldovan's traveling band of spellfire-seekers? I don't mean grasping merchants who'd take it if it fell into their hands, but agents sent along on this run just for the purpose of getting their hands on one Shandril Shessair, or at least her spellfire. Who's left?"

Korthauvar reached for a handy decanter, scowling thoughtfully. "Well, now, I think we can agree Aumlar Chaunthoun is dead at last, and his two bully-blades, too. I'm not so sure that the Red Wizard who attacked him went down, though."

Hlael Toraunt held out an empty goblet to be filled. "Phel-dred? I doubt it. That one has survived more 'certain deaths' than even Aumlar."

The taller Zhentarim poured, sipped his own goblet, refilled it with apparent surprise at how much he'd just emptied it, and sighed. "So how many of us are left?"

Hlael made a wry face. "Considering the Brotherhood as a unified force? I don't think anyone since the High Imperceptor has made that mistake!"

Korthauvar gave him a look devoid of the slightest hint of mirth and replied, "Humor me."

Hlael set down his glass a little hastily. "Well, there're Mhegras and Sabran—a very dangerous priest. Mhegras is all temper and bluster, but with Sabran guiding him . .."

"I've not seen either this morn. They were running around in the battle, but now seem to have disappeared."

"Yes, but we can't assume they're dead. Any two wagon-merchants could be them in spell-guise, or they could be skulking in the roadside brush, or—"

Korthauvar waved an impatient hand. "Who else?" Hlael held out his goblet again. "Praulgar and Stlarakur are dead, which leaves just three young magelings I know of,

plus whatever hireswords they've brought along: Deverel, Jalarrak, and Rostol."

"More anxious to do each other dirty than to accomplish anything, of course," Korthauvar agreed, pouring,

"Of course. The most numerous opposition to the Brotherhood in the caravan remains the Cult of the Dragon—as usual, hereabouts. Our mighty young mage of a spellfire consort, Narm the Clueless, took down Praulgar's slayer, but 'twas really spellfire that slew him and his fellow blade, Brasker and Holvan. Another pair of Cult swords—their names, I know not—went down in the same battle by other hands. The worst of it all is, I'm not sure how many more Cult swordsmen and thieves like them are along posing as merchants. There was a flurry of signings with Voldovan, on and off, after he agreed to take Shandril Shessair's passage."
"Aye, every third wagon-horse could be a foe. Not a new worry. Count me out who else we do know."
"Well, the two really capable Cultists along are both dead: Malivur, who was rather carelessly playing a spice-merchant, and the thief Krostal. Another firewits mage with a wise guide."
"Ah, the clockseller. I thought I knew him from somewhere. He stole the Tiara of the Eyes from under our noses—and off Lady Thaulindra's head—in Sheirtalar some years back."
"That's the man. That leaves one more Krostal knew about, but I haven't spotted: a Cult wizard he considered 'powerful.' There were also whispers among Bluthlock's men that they'd best watch for a mage of Scornubel along on Voldovan's run who served the Cult but also quietly received messages from Luskan."
Korthauvar's brows rose, and he reached for the decanter again. "If both sayings are true and refer to the same man, he could well outstrip us both in spells."
Hlael nodded. "At least our tarrying has cleared the field of a handcount of other wizards, for when we have to move at last."
"What's your measure of the Arcane, the Red Wizards, and others? I confess I'm just peering and guessing, with not a single surety to my reckoning."
Hlael shrugged. "I wear the same cloak of doubt, but there

are two persons for certain. One is Stlarakur's slayer, a sly rogue who calls himself the 'Dark Blade of Doom'—Marlel of Scornubel, being paid by I know not whom, and currently posing as Haransau Olimer, of 'Haransau Olimer's Best Blandreths.' "
Korthauvar nodded. "For all his oil, he's hard to miss. The other?"
Hlael shrugged. "Another Red Wizard, but I know not whom, or his guise in the wagons."
"There's never just one of them," Korthauvar said bitterly, his fingers idly caressing the velvet-smooth decanter.
Hlael smiled his crooked smile. "Aye, but which fat, cowering merchant is it?"
"I don't know," Korthauvar said slowly, "and I don't dare show myself trying to find out." He smiled suddenly, and added, "So we can tell Drauthtar we dare not move in to try to take spellfire yet."
A cold, familiar voice spoke from another handy decanter sharply and suddenly enough to make both Zhentarim flinch. "Consider me informed. As it happens—luckily for you—I concur with your assessment. The time to snatch spellfire is not yet. Proceed, but don't fail to take Shandril when the time is right, or your deaths will be as lingering and as painful as you deserve."
Korthauvar and Hlael shivered in unison, exchanged hasty glances, and murmured, "It shall be as you command."
"Indeed. Don't smash decanters this time. 'Tis a waste of good wine, drink that I've a feeling you're going to need."
Panting, Besmer risked a look back. They were still plodding after him, red-faced and scowling, swords out.
It had been a mistake, aye, but—a firespitting wand that anyone could use! How often in a life did one get the chance to snatch one of those?
Perhaps just once, if those bully-blades caught up to him. Pounds of heavy armor they were wearing, and still closing! Catching up despite the miles he'd loped, then walked, and

now staggered since stabbing the merchant.
Most traders had guards who were only too glad to plunder the baggage and be gone when you slew their masters, but... most merchants didn't wander the Chionthar-bank trails with wands thrust through their belts, either.
He didn't need to see the face of the Master of Shadows to know all too well that the lady with the sword—gods, what a beauty!—had been right. He had to get out of Scornubel in haste or die.
Following the Chionthar couldn't get him lost but wasn't a road the Master's Eyes could ride swiftly along, seeking him. West it led, to Baldur's Gate, where he could take ship for Water deep to hide amongst the throngs.
Besmer knew better than to take a barge downriver. If he was spotted, signals could race to Scornubel and back, and his execution could be ordered without any warning to him.
What he hadn't known better than to do was put his dagger through the throat of that boastful merchant, after the man's pack-train had come out of nowhere to the pool Besmer was drinking from. Who'd have thought a dead man could command such loyalty?
Perhaps they just wanted the wand as much as he did. 'Twas a beautiful thing, a massive and smooth-wrought metal grip that fit the hand beautifully, mated to a jewel-studded carved wood shaft. As he staggered on, his hand went to its reassuring comfort time and time again. More like a royal scepter than a wizard's wand. Those were usually plain sticks of wood, but this gaudy thing was real enough. He'd seen that merchant blast a boar and clearly heard the muttered word that unleashed a ball of fire. It had streamed across the pool, trailing sparks, and cooked the boar before it could even begin its charge.
A dinner none of them would ever enjoy, now. He'd had the man's throat open and the wand in his own hand in a trice and been off through the tall grass before a single bodyguard had even shouted. They'd set off after him like

hounds, not hesitating a moment, and not giving up as the miles passed and hills rose and fell under their boots.
None of them had turned back even after he'd given the two swiftest the wand they so wanted—or at least its fireballs, two air-shattering blasts that turned hard-striding men to whirling ashes. The surviving bodyguards had been careful to keep well apart from each other after that.
He touched the wand again. He'd never had magic at his command before, and gods, now he knew why wizards swaggered so! What power! Look at someone, point your wand, say a word, and wham! Knight or lord, priest or mage, they went down, gone in smoke at your whim.
Oh, he could see why they wanted this wand, all right. He didn't want to use it too often, lest there be some limit to the fires it held . . . particularly if he used it all before getting away from these doggedly pursuing men. His feet felt like two heavy-laden coffers, his lungs burned, and he was starting to slip and stumble. He had to catch his breath, win time to rest—
Blarrrgh! Besmer fell on his face, slid to a stop and hopped upright again, his ankle shrieking protest. He hobbled on, downslope, and had to look back. One of them was
cresting the height he'd just left already, teeth bared in an angry grin.
Tymora claw Beshaba for me now! Nothing could stop that man from catching him before he reached the bottom of the slope. Besmer assumed a look of despair, drew the wand and held it concealed, close to his body. He waited until the man's thudding boots were growing loud behind him, then whirled, said the word, and pointed.
The blast of flame snatched him back off his feet and hurled him away, head ringing and half-blinded. He'd seen the man's agonized, spreadeagled body outlined by fire, ere he'd been whirled away, but... 'twas done.
Shaking his head to clear it, Besmer got up and stumbled on, never seeing the dark, wraith-like cloud descending out

of the sky behind his shoulders.

Waterdeep had been glorious, a feast of magics, and Evaereol Rathrane had grown strong enough to manifest hands that could snatch and hold and carry. Greatness soon to come was more than a dream now.

Yet he still dropped things from time to time, and found it easier by far to drift along as a shifting, shapeless cloud, as he was drifting now, excited by his whelmed power but wary. The world had changed much since his days in Jethaere.

These humans would have marveled at Jethaere of the Towers, and might well have been less arrogant than to call their crowded, stinking harbor-huddle a "City of Splendors," but they rolled in magic—magic so carelessly and lavishly used as to seemingly be held of little value.

Yet Waterdeep had not been an unguarded treasure-house. Rathrane still shuddered at the remembered pain of its wards and leaping enchantments and the spells hurled by furious mages who saw him and lashed out without a moment's hesitation. Flames too bright and too close still burned more than they succored.

He'd fled from pain, lashed and hooked and scorched, out over wilderlands once more, drifting on from where a frantic flight from guardian-gargoyles had taken him in the painful aftermath of his last and worst attempt to snatch magic in Waterdeep. Wizards of Jethaere would never have spun spells in such a rough-and-tumble way, nor spent so much Art for clawing guardian beasts. Would every last mage's tower be girt with such fearsome sentinels as well as the more subtle, exacting, and expected wards? Such fastnesses should be out here, yes, far from—

Magic blossomed below, bright and sudden, and the shadowy thing that had been Rathrane of Jethaere smiled an unseen smile and sank swiftly toward that beckoning glow.

Mhegras of the Zhentarim groaned as he swam out of darkness and blinked awake. He lay still and silent on his back, hearing little rustlings in tangled and interwoven

branches above him. He was weak and sore, and when he strove to lift a hand, it was some time before his quavering fingers rose into view. "Bane preserve me," he whispered hoarsely, watching them tremble.

"Pray indeed to our Dark and Dread Lord," a familiar voice said sourly from close by, "for by his will we're delivered from death." Sabran, no doubt lying here too. Those Harpers, a grip like iron ...

Mhegras thrust away that frightening memory with a whimper, and weighed the priest's words. Bewilderment came. "H-he took direct interest in us?"

"Nay," Sabran snarled in low tones, "the spell that brought us back was mine, cast beforehand at the cost of a life for each of us, lives provided by those two idiot weavers in the squeaking wagon. Great Bane granted that spell to me. I didn't think much of your protective magics—rightly, as it turns out."

Mhegras scowled and tried to sit up. There was a moment of trees and sky whirling around, sickening weakness, and ... he was lying on his back again, looking up at the sky, with fresh aches, and mists drifting through his thoughts. His neck ...

He moved his head a little, to make the pain go away, but it got worse. He groaned again.

"Wait," Sabran hissed, "and be glad those two Harpers just broke our necks and threw us down in this ditch, that they didn't go chopping pieces off us or looting our pouches. If you give my magic time to finish its work, you'll be able to walk. If we can find something to eat, we'll soon feel as if nothing happened to us."

Mhegras felt his fingers itching. When he lifted them into view, he saw that they were twitching uncontrollably. Marvellous for casting spells! He let his hands fall back, clawed the ground beside him in sudden fury, and announced harshly, "When I get my hands on that Arauntar, he'll wish nothing happened, too—for the few moments I

give him, before my conjured brainbore-worm burrows into one of his eyes and starts gnawing his brain!"

They were coming for him now, and the sky was darkening strangely ahead, almost as if it was growing greedy, long-fingered hands, reaching for his wand!

Besmer stumbled back as the armored men came lumbering down the hillside with growls of triumph and was struck by a sudden, chilling thought: What if that merchant had been a wizard, after all? Was this his ghost, come to claim his wand back?

Gods, yes! He could see a dark face, now, two dark twinkling stars of eyes in a shadowy head that had no jaw, on shoulders with no chest below, only a cloud of swirling shadows and those two reaching arms .. .

Screaming, Besmer Altuth thrust his wand forward and gave the wraith fire—flame that dwindled to nothing!

The wandfire disappeared as fast as it erupted, hissing to silence as the wand sputtered and the tingling cloud of shadows settled over Besmer like descending nightfall.

Despairingly Besmer waved the wand like a blade, slashing at shadows, and spat out its word for fire again and again. Nothing happened, as the first swordsman's slashing blade took Besmer's dagger out of his hand along with two fingers, and the man's second blow brought Besmer more pain than he'd ever felt before.

He lost the wand during his helpless, agonized stagger, trying to drag out his sword with his other hand even though he knew the life was leaking out of him. The blade had gone right through him, down low on his right side, and—

Another running swordsman arrived with a shout, and Besmer saw his blade come whirring up—

Now there was too much pain to see anything or do anything but fall into the greedily reaching darkness.

The thunder of hooves faded as Arauntar and Beldimarr spurred forward, scouting ahead for a campsite. Darhabran Windhome watched them go, spat thoughtfully to one side,

and told the man on the perch beside him unnecessarily, "Triel, right enough."
Orthil Voldovan refrained from snapping something sarcastic. Windhome was old and loyal, a good man, and was carrying his wounds better than many guards far younger. All day the old guard had worked the reins of this mismatched team of beasts expertly with no betrayal of his pain but the odd grunt or growl, and kept the battered wagon on the much-rutted road.
He leaned closer to the caravan master now and muttered, "Master, wouldn't it be best if we just put a knife in the lass right now?"
He did not have to say who "the lass" might be.
"Don't think I haven't considered it," Orthil grunted. "If we didn't need her fire to defend us on the run past Dragonspear, I'd do it right now."
"We can't trust her!"
"I know, but we have to—unless you can grow me a dozen crossbowmen and two dozen good swordsmen, all of them in quarrel-proof armor and on quarrel-proof horses!"
The old guard gave Voldovan a sidelong growl of disgust. "She's a blade at our backs, I tell thee!"
Orthil put a hand on his arm. "Easy, Darhabran. 'Twon't be for much longer; of that, at least, I can assure you. And if we have to dagger her in a hurry—well, I know who I can call on."
Rathrane hung close above the grunting, brutally thrusting men until long after they'd leaned panting on their swords around the sprawled, much-hacked figure in the trampled grass. The crumbling remnants of the wand he'd drained were plucked up, tossed aside with sighs, and the men wiped their blades and wearily began looting the body of the man they'd slain.
Not a spark of magic shone about any of them, so the wraith-wizard drifted on, heading away from the river now. Distant echoes of recent great magic roiled ever so faintly off

to the northeast. That was as good a direction as any.
The taste of the wand had awakened fresh hunger in him. He was so close to being able to materialize fully, to have a body once more, to stride this changed Faerun as boldly as any of these swaggering fools who called themselves wizards. He could taste once more, smell again, and feel the cool breezes he was riding.
Evaereol Rathrane would be a name heard again in Faerun, a name feared and respected. A name that would be spreading soon ... he needed but a trifle more, and if these echoes were good indication of what lay ahead, he'd shortly have more than enough, perhaps more might than ever before.
Greywings were honking in the distant backlands as Beldimarr waved them off the road close by the crude gates ofTriel.
Obediently Shandril guided their groaning wagon along a palisade of huge, graying old tree trunks toward the distant figure of Arauntar, who stood atop some rocks, directing wagons. As they bumped across the grassy but much-rutted field, Narm frowned. "Why aren't we going into Triel?"
Shandril shrugged. "Ask him," she said, waving a hand at the grizzled Harper, so Narm did.
Arauntar swung himself up on the perch and growled, "Just along here , . . aye . . . right, halt! Tether and hobble, lad. I'll chock your wheels."
"Well?" Narm prompted him, a few minutes of stooping and rein-wrestling later.
In a low voice Arauntar told them both, 'Ter short answer: Triel's ruled by a madman, Elvar the Grainlord. He's so afraid outlanders'll try to steal food from him—he who's no slouch at thieving himself—that he won't let any of us stay a night inside his walls."
Narm looked at the decaying but still formidable stockade, and muttered, "Is he one of those gigantic waddling gluttons?"

Arauntar grinned. "Ah, I see you've tasted the world a trifle already, young Lord o' Spells. No, he's just mad, that's all. He tasted a hard winter a score o' years back and has feared running out of food ever since. So inside you'll see dirt streets, little rickety shops an' taverns .. - and looming over 'em all, granary after granary, packed to the rafters. Folk in Triel go about with long jab-forks, to slay rats on sight, an' everyone has to keep traps an' patrol 'em proper, so no dead rat rots. They get pickled, see, in case there's need to eat them."

Shandril gagged, and Arauntar grinned happily. "Oh, an' he's mad another way, too: about the gods."

Narm, still slightly green from a vivid vision of curled-up rat claws sticking up by the dozens out of an open cask of pickling-wine, asked reluctantly, "Mad about the gods how ?"

"Every four mornings or so—or swifter by now, I've not been in to see, yet—Elvar awakens after new dream-visions, and announces he now serves a new god. Not that he creates 'em, see—just not the god he went to sleep praying to. He's been around 'em all dozens of times by now, an' keeps his guards, poor dogs, busy rooting out regalia and holy symbols they hid away from the last time around for this or that Divine One."

"Anything else?" Shandril asked, a little faintly.

"Enough, be it not? That's why nary a caravan goes anywhere but around Triel or camps outside, here or over yon."

"What's that other road?" Narm asked, pointing.

"The Dusk Road, from Elturel. It joins the Trade Way at Triel midmoot, inside. That roof atop the knoll hard by is Duskview House—an inn outside the walls, for the likes o' you and me—or rather, for the likes of travelers who dare to stay there."

Shandril raised an eyebrow. "Particularly dangerous?"

"For the lady who hurls spellfire, every place we'll see is

'particularly dangerous,' but no, 'tis just too pricey for Master Voldovan's tastes. 'Tis a highcoin house, newly built an' all, sitting all serene on its height looking down the Dusk Road. It caters to the safety of the lone traveler, and charges accordingly."
"So why do I see Voldovan on his way there?" Shandril asked quietly.
"He has to look for replacement guards somewhere," Arauntar said heavily, "or we'll none of us live to see Waterdeep."
"Can we go inside by daylight?" Narm asked, squinting at the sky to judge how much day was left.
"I might lead an armed band inside to buy us food, later— a barrel of rats or two, whatever they'll sell," Arauntar growled amiably, "but you won't be along with me, nor any of these fat wagon-merchants."
Shandril raised the other eyebrow. "Thieves in the streets? Brawlers rule the taverns?"
"Exactly," the Harper snapped. "Taking down travelers is their sport an' their chief source o' coin, an' there's no law nor justice to appeal to."
He swung himself nimbly over Narm and down off the perch in one energetic lunge, landing boots-first on the ground with a solid thud, and squinted back up at them through the dust of his own landing.
"So stay here," he said sternly, "both of you. Triel's like Scornubel but a twentieth its size, thrice its desperation, an' no tense standoffs to forge peace. Here, 'tis every man for himself, an' daggers see heavy use."
Shandril smiled thinly. "So how exactly, Arauntar, is it different from anywhere else in Faerun?"

PLEASING THE BRINGER OF DOOM

The true purposes of kings are to set fashions, take blame for famine and harsh laws and oppressions practiced by nobles, to give commoners someone to shout at and throw dung upon, bards and romantics someone to be proud of or

wax tragic about, and to feed the rats—personally, with their own bones. I just wish some of them would get around to doing it sooner.

Hanjack Thallowblade, "The Farfaring Minstrel"
Why I'll Never Be A Respected Bard
Year of the Leaning Post

"Behold," Voldovan muttered to Beldimarr. "The only man in Triel we can trust."

The guard nodded, his weatherbeaten face expressionless, and murmured as softly as any sly courtier, "Pity we can't hire him and leave these others."

They were looking across the palatial lounge of Dusk-view House at a tall, gaunt man who looked every bit as Realms-worn as Beldimarr. Voldovan had no idea what his real name was, but he'd been a fixture in Triel for thirty winters at least: the local herald, Stormshield. He was here to witness any bonds of hiring Voldovan might arrange with the motley crew of swordsmen gathered in the lounge.

The caravan master didn't need to look at Beldimarr to know the burly guard shared his assessment of this bunch; gutter-scrapings and broken men. "Loyalty" was a worthless fiction to most of them, whatever words came out of their mouths and no matter what papers they signed. But then, the way things were going, most of them would probably be dead in a day or two.

Along with the rest of us, Orthil Voldovan thought grimly, as he took the high-backed chair the stone-faced Duskview stewards provided. Beldimarr took up a stance behind Voldovan's right shoulder, arms folded across his chest—and fingers on the hilts of two of the many throwing-daggers sheathed down his baldrics.

Voldovan tried not to sigh. Some of these men were down-on-their-luck hireswords, but most would be thieves and outlaws on the run from trouble elsewhere. If he was lucky, a few might be caravan guards who'd taken wounds or fallen sick, tarried in Triel, and now needed coin to travel on. He'd

no doubt word of "the spellfire-wench" had raced ahead of him, though; word always did whenever cargo or folk of special interest made runs through the Sword Coast backlands.

Similar whispers had come to Scornubel a season ago, when Duskview House had been built. Word was that Thayans had raised this inn—and someone with more coins than wits had certainly done so, to build such luxury out here in the Blackrocks, on the doorstep of Mad Elvar. That meant, try as he might, Orthil Voldovan would be hiring snakes into his midst.

Lucky me, Voldovan thought sourly, ignoring the decanter the stewards had placed in front of him in favor of his own belt-flask. He surveyed the uneasily shifting men across the room, chose not to see Stormshield's expectant "Shall we begin?" glance for a moment or two, and thought again about Duskview. The whitedaub ceiling, he noted, was worked into an intricate design of styilized dragons flying in curves and snarling at each other ... a design in bold relief that was studded with many cavities. Spyholes, of course.

This place was a trading center—and to a Thayan, a trading center is also a spying center. There'd been whispers up and down the Trade Way for some seasons now that a Red Wizard was trying to take over the Zhentarim, to win trade riches and a private army, to boot. Duskview would be some other Red Wizard's private road to riches ... so anyone offering himself as a caravan guard might well be a warrior in the service of an unseen Thayan.

Scornubel's muttering mouths were good. They even had a name or two to attach to tales of "Red Wizards skulking hereabouts." Thavaun was one such; Hulrivior another. It might be interesting to get his new hires slightly drunk around a campfire, drop those two names, and see who stiffened and what was said. 'Twas always nice to know who your loyal employees really worked for.

"Well, let's get started," Voldovan told the room, hoping his

words didn't sound quite as sour as he felt.
"Dear, dear," the soft voice behind the lantern said mockingly, "Elvar would have been horrified."
The squeaking, chittering rats paid no heed as they swarmed over the sprawled body on the cellar floor. They worked fast; Elvar was down to almost bones now, in most places.
"Elvar, Elvar, this is all your fault!" the lantern-carrier chided, stepping around the corpse. "All of these oh-so-secure metal-sheathed bins, and stone fitted so carefully. Starve your rats, and you only keep them at their most dangerous!"
Elvar had been a constant nuisance. It was a wonder one of his exasperated fellow Trielans hadn't brained him with a stool or threshing-flail and brought peace to this backwater long ago.
Such attempted public services would now be perils faced by the lantern-carrier in his new spell-guise of Elvar the Grainlord. Spellfire had brought too many busy rivals into Triel, and if one of them had slain Elvar openly, the uproar would have upset a lot of things. Wherefore bringing Elvar down here and smashing in the back of his head with a handy blandreth—the things were everywhere, filled with cellarcap mushrooms to soak up moisture that might spoil a single grain of Elvar's precious hoard—had at last become the best thing to do.
Elvar was going to mellow in the days ahead, the man with the lantern decided, as he proceeded to the farthest corner of this deepest granary. Settling on fewer gods to circle between, and becoming less of a wild-eyed annoyance to all. Make him respected somehow, as he openly groomed a successor who just might be ready by the time an unfortunate accident took Elvar from the Trielans he guarded so carefully. Yes.
Now it was time to lure away the one called Beldimarr with a false Harper message, so the plot at hand could proceed.

Spellfire was too useful to let slip by. The gods don't hand out chances to rule the world all that often.
An eye drew back from a hole in the floor of a dark room sporting many such holes. Its owner rose and
stepped through a shimmering of the air where magic made a wall of silence. Beyond was a pleasant upper room where the day could be seen drawing down through large arched windows, and many tall-fluted goblets and decanters stood handy on glossy tables nigh high-backed, comfortable chairs.
"Seen enough?" a buttery voice purred, from the depths of one such ornament of furniture.
The reply was equally nonchalant. "My, my. Sit here athwart this muddy wagon road, and all Faerun comes to you. All we need do is close our hands around this prize."
"As Xatholont once said, that's more easily resolved than accomplished," the buttery voice observed. "Of course. Are you ready?"
"Doubt me never," was the reply. "Master Voldovan is about to be very surprised."
"'About to be'?"
"Rightabout—now."
"Douse that fire!" Arauntar ordered gruffly out of the darkness.
Narm and Shandril came out of their doze flinching, and Shandril's surprise made momentary tongues of flame flare from her fingertips.
"We didn't hear you coming," Narm yelped, as he bent hastily to their fire-bucket.
"Evidently," the guard said in dry tones. " Tis a good thing I'm not a spellfire-seeker with a blade ready in my hand, aye?"
"Aye," Shandril agreed wearily, stirring the ashes with a stick as Narm poured. "We were just finishing eating."
"You snore loudly for folk caught feasting," the Harper commented, squatting beside them. "I'm glad you got some

rest, because I'm falling- on-my-face weary m'self, an' one o' you might want to be awake once I'm in my dreams—for yer own safety, if you catch my meaning."
Shandril cast a quick look across the field. Campfires winked and snapped among the dark wagons, outlining the dark, placid shapes of the hobbled horses, who stood like an army in the empty, unlit center of camp. "I'm growing very tired of always awaiting the next attack," she said quietly.
"Hunh. Fd've thought you'd be used to it, by now," the Harper said gruffly, holding a hand out over the smoking coals to judge their remaining heat. He shook his head at what he found and captured ShandriTs stick to spread them out.
The maid from Highmoon shook her head silently, then laid it down on her thighs. She sat with her hands clasped under her knees, looking into the night, as silence stretched. Arauntar was just about to rise and depart when she murmured, "Has this been a particularly bad run, Arauntar?"
The guard grinned. "Particularly bad? No. Particularly bad is when no one makes it, and they find yer gnawed bones on the road later. Call it somewhat bad. More brigands than usual, more trouble in the wagons ..."
"Thanks to me," Shandril said softly.
"Thanks to a lot o' greedy men hungry to steal something not their own, an' too fool-headed to know what danger they put all Faerun in, by trying," Arauntar told her firmly. "You didn't ask to have spellfire, now, did you?"
"No," Shandril replied, in a voice they could barely hear. "No. All I wanted was a little adventure."
"Ah. An' that we gave you, in a generous ladling!"
Narm snorted. "Like stew?"
"Like stew, lad; served up fast an' hot, an' burns if yer not careful!" The Harper spat thoughtfully into the coals and added, " Tis the best time of year for making this
run, actually. In winter, the howling storms and grinding ice shut down sailing, so someone always tries to make the

high-coin runs through the worst of the snows, after the mud has hardened, see?"
"And wind up frozen, or eaten by wolves?" "Or buried alive by a blizzard, yes. Even if every wolf falls over dead an' the sun shines an' there's no bad ice an' the snows are shallow—an' they never are—deepwinter runs are hard. You have to take along so many archers, an' so much food and firewood to keep 'em alive that it's hard to turn much coin."
Arauntar shifted, spat into the fire again, and added, "The ore raiding bands and packs o' hungry wolves are always bad, so skimping on archers dooms you ... and even .then, if the winds pick up and blizzards come, wolves an' ores come charging at you out of driving, blinding snow or sleeting ice when you can't see in time to take 'em down with a bow."
Narm chuckled. "Any more cheer?"
"Aye," Arauntar replied dryly. "In such cold, even a minor wound can mean yer death."
"Charming. So this run's a frolic?"
"Pretty well. If we could just afford a dozen loyal mages, an' ferret all the worms out o' our wagons, an' use yer spellfire as our 'big lance' when raiders come in strength, 'twould be a stroll up to Waterdeep."
" 'If is such a backbiting word," Shandril observed sourly, watching the man yawn. "You should get some sleep, friend Harper."
Arauntar gave her a sharp look. "None of that naming— not even at a whisper!" He yawned again, rose and stretched, glanced at the stars, and growled, "Yer right, though. Bed for me. Inside, now. Wagonboards slow down crossbow bolts an' hurled daggers alike."
He took two long strides away into the night, then turned and added, "Go nowhere alone." Shandril lifted a hand to signal she'd heard, and the guard waved back and went off across the field.
Narm and Shandril watched him go until the night swallowed him and glanced at each other—and promptly

yawned in unison.
"Inside, pretty boy," Shandril ordered with a grin. "First watch for me."
"I'd argue," Narm mumbled, swinging himself up into the wagon, "but I'd be asleep before I reached the end of a sentence. You heard the man: Inside with you, daughter of Dammasae!"
"You just want the bed warmed," his lady said fondly, joining him inside.
"Me? Sole surviving apprentice of Marimmar the Magnificent?" Narm protested in mock innocence.
"You," Shandril confirmed, taking the stool beside the bed where she could face the door and sitting down carefully on a rough piece of armor she'd found. She'd have to trust in its discomfort to keep her awake. By the gods, lives sometimes clung to such small, simple things. ,
The stars were beautiful overhead, the night clear and cold. Good; its bite should help to keep her awake.
Sharantyr trudged along the Trade Way alone, walking as quietly as she could. The caravan had probably made Triel by nightfall. She'd catch up to them in another day. Of course, that just might be too late.
The Knight of Myth Drannor was still entertaining that heartening thought when something dimmed the stars above. She blinked, knuckled her eyes to clear the weariness
that must be clouding her vision, then stepped back in sudden alarm.
Something like a great net of shadows was settling silently over her! Sharantyr sprinted out from under it and veered toward the nearest tree, snatching out her blade as she ran. That tree was in a ditch, and as her boots slithered downslope, she risked a look back. It was flying after her, right enough!
Heedless of what might be waiting, the ranger burst through a tangle of small, thorny branches and ducked around the

trunk of her chosen tree, crouching low and then stabbing up with her blade as the stars dimmed around her.

No smell, no sound—she was cleaving nothing. A nothing that tingled and thickened around her, roiling around . . . her backpack, bulging with the three glowing blades!

Sharantyr slipped out of its straps, swung it off her shoulders, and in the same sweeping movement flung it back toward the road, into the starshine. It bounced to a halt, the . . . presence with it.

Yes, the cloud was thickening around those three hilts. Some sort of blade-phantom slain by the blades long ago? Or a creature bound to them by magic, that departed to hunt but must return?

She peered at it as she came out from behind the tree, one hand on Lhaeo's gems and the other holding her sword ready. The shadow-thing looked vaguely manlike, or rather like a grotesquely huge cloak that coalesced into a shadowy smudge of a head, above quite solid-seeming shoulders and hands . . . hands that were busy at the lacings of her pack.

She slashed through those arms, and her blade slowed as if ploughing through wet mud, but aside from the shadowy head turning briefly toward her with a decidely
malevolent movement that turned into a brief lean forward, as if it had detected something of interest, there was no reaction. The arms continued their work, uncut and apparently unaffected. Sharantyr circled quickly around the shadow-thing, struck by a sudden thought, and drew back her sword, holding out Lhaeo's bag in front
of her instead.

The shadowy head lifted sharply, turning to follow her hand as she circled. The ranger's eyes narrowed, and she sprang back.

As the wraith turned once more to her pack, tugging out a sword so its bright glow flooded the night, Sharantyr carefully loosened the strings of her precious bag and felt inside for the stones she needed: the two sharp ones.

She let them prick her fingers, to make sure, carefully drew them forth, and closed the bag. The shadow-wraith had laid its hands on two swords, and their glows had promptly died, their radiance roiling briefly up its arms. Those shadow-arms grew darker and more substantial as the glows faded—and it was already tugging forth the third and last blade.

Sharantyr drew in a deep breath, strode forward until she held a gem on either side of that shadowy head and shoulders, and said carefully, "Varouth."

A whirlwind of tiny spitting lightning bolts erupted from the gem in her left hand and streaked to the gem in her right, racing through the shadow-wraith. Lightning whirled around that second gem and snarled back, brighter and stronger.

The shadow-wraith sat bolt upright and trembled, growing darker and more solid with alarming speed as the lightnings raced through it again, back and forth, so swiftly now that they formed a continuous, crackling line of gnawing, spitting energies.

"Yes!" a faint, echoing voice seemed to whisper from all around her. "Yesssss!"

The figure rose slowly in height, and Sharantyr rose with it, until she was standing upright with her arms raised, behind a dark, cloaked figure that trembled in time to her lightnings, shuddering and growing steadily more solid.

It started to groan, in a deep, seemingly male voice, then shuddered and convulsed, hunching its arms in. It seemed held upright by her lightning when it would rather have shrunk down and nursed pain. The groans rose into sobbing cries, babbled words that might have been curses or frantic incantations. They became screams, wild high shrieks that echoed back from the stars.

Sharantyr held her two gems firmly, sudden sweat drenching her, and the wraith rose in a crackling cloud of racing lightnings before her, shouting, "No! Too much! Too much!"

Heat beat at her face. The wraith howled and turned its ghost of a face toward her, wild-eyed, but its shape was collapsing back into a thing of rushing, swirling darkness. Sprays of lightning raced within it, whirling inside the shadow-bulk that flung out frantic arms or branches in all directions, stabbing at the night in agony as it started to whirl and tumble and spin, brightness glowing inside its gloom. A fireball with dark, ragged edges tore free of her resonating field of magic and raced blindly away across the sky, howling in mad pain.

Sharantyr held out her two gems for a long time as their lightning died to a faint, crackling blue thread, and let her gasps return to calmness. The shadow-thing did not come back, but the night-chill returned.

"Well," she told the stars at last, quelling the magic of the gems before they were entirely exhausted, "live another night in Faerun, see another mystery. Build a
shining collection. Now, I wonder if the gods answer them for us, when we die?"

The stars overhead ventured no opinion. Sharantyr smiled, unsurprised, as she stowed the gems, reclaimed her pack—the blades were crumbling already, and she tossed their hilts into the ditch—and resumed her walk.

Narm sprang up from his stool and sniffed. There it was again.

Smoke, very close by ... woodsmoke. There was a hiss and crackle, like the sound he'd made dousing their embers. Someone had sloshed water on flames, to put them out—but quietly, with no shouts nor running feet... and very nearby.

The smell was strong now, and his view of the stars out the front of the wagon increasingly hazy. Water to quench flame, or to make more smoke!

Narm shook Shandril awake, muting her sleepy question with a firm hand. "Fire," he murmured in her ear. "Our wagon, I think, and set by someone waiting outside."

Shan took his hand away and murmured back, "We're being

smoked out?"
Narm nodded, and she purred, "Crouch low by the entrance. Do nothing until I shout your name or someone comes inside."
Narm nodded again and did as he was bid. In his wake, Shandril went flat to the floor, hoping no one outside was planning to crawl around and thrust a blade up through the floorboards.
The wood was hot. No blades would come from beneath. There must be a fire there. Very soon, the floor would burst into open flame with a roar, and consume them and the wagon together, unless ...
Shandril felt around for the drain—the finger-sized hole in all of Voldovan's wagons, covered by a swivel-plate of metal, that was there to let water and spilled cargo out. There! She eased the plate open a trifle, ignoring the pain—and a tiny tongue of flame rose up into her face. Shandril called up her spellfire, opened her mouth, and sucked it in.
It was hot, scratchy going down her throat, and inclined to tickle her nose . . . but it went in without setting her to choking, or searing her as it should have done.
Shandril spread herself out flat and willed the fire into her. So long as she bled spellfire into it, to enfold and absorb the flames, she could drink it in.
Her scalp prickled. Sweat was all over her in a sheen . . . she was getting hot, all over. Her fingertips ached ... "Shan!" Narm whispered. "Are you all right?" She nodded vigorously and waved at him to keep quiet, but he held up his own hand in a "heed me here" signal, fumbled in her things, and came up with her hand mirror, which he held up so that she could see herself.
Flames were licking out of her mouth and eyes! No wonder he was concerned.
She nodded, smiled, and waved to let him know she was fine and went back to sucking fire.
In the brief time she'd lifted her head to look at Narm, a tiny

ring of dancing flames had risen beneath her throat and breast. If this worked as before, only her bared flesh could take in flame—at least until roaring fire had engulfed her, and she hoped whoever was waiting outside to capture or slay them would have grown impatient by then.

Rather than spend time disrobing, Shandril wriggled backward along the floor a trifle to take in these new flames. Smoke curled up thickly around her, and for the first time she coughed.

Hastily she crawled forward again to suck flames, hoping that the floor wouldn't give way before the firesetter's patience did. There was always the chance that someone had just set fire to the wagon and gone away in hopes that they'd be asleep and dead of smoke before waking, but somehow that didn't sit with how she saw these spellfire-seekers. Kill, and so destroy what you prized? No, he'd be out there waiting—if, of course, it was a "he." Were there any other women along on the caravan? Oh, yes, one of the merchants had a wife, as fat and ugly as himself ... of course, it could be neither he nor she, but "it." Shandril quelled such thoughts, resisting an impulse to laugh at a sudden vision of a gigantic dragon curled up like a cat before a hearth, breathing flame at her in a long, slow, steady stream.

She was starting to feel bloated now, like the day so long ago when she'd bet Gorstag she could consume an entire great blandreth of soup and had, then had wished she hadn't. There was pain now, too, in her joints and fingertips and toes, an ache that grew steadily greater.

"Shan," Narm said quietly, "you're starting to glow."

"Why thank you, kind sir," she replied tartly, making light of his words. "Every lady should glow when at her best." She would have said more, but a sudden shudder set her to coughing, and this time, as she'd feared, she couldn't stop.

Every hacking explosion gouted forth flame, and she had to turn her head hastily to avoid scorching gear. There was too much cargo for sudden rushes anywhere, or she'd have run

out the door regardless of arrows or waiting spells and spewed fire into the night, but. ..
Outside, someone snarled, "At last! I thought they'd never —"
A man's voice she'd heard before on the run. Well, no great surprise there.
Shandril threw back her head, teeth clenched. Her knees, elbows, and breasts were starting to ache now. If she didn't rid herself of the fire she'd swallowed soon, someone was going to get a great surprise. She hoped it wouldn't be Narm, deafened by a mighty blast and suddenly wearing a wetness that had been his Shandril a moment earlier.
No, she dare not stay in here a moment longer. Trusting to spellfire to keep her safe, she crawled unsteadily to the front of the wagon, flames crackling from her hands as she went. She hoped Narm would have sense enough to get out fast, whatever happened next. This wagon would probably go up with a roar, very soon.
Calling on spellfire, she flew, bursting out through the doorway on her side and arrowing up sharply into the sky. . "Hah!"
Mhegras of the Zhentarim was standing below, a look of triumph on his face and his fingers already weaving a spell. Shandril vomited fire at him and out of the heart of its spectacular flood blasted him with spellfire, an angry white shaft of force that ate into the ground in an instant, leaving nothing in its wake but a pair of empty, slightly smoking wizard's boots.
When Narm burst out of the wagon with a yell, daggers in both hands, his lady was just landing after an angry (and futile) foe-seeking flight around the wagon and going to her knees to suck flames from its underside. The look on Arauntar's face as he came running up, sword in hand, was priceless.
So, Narm suspected, was his own.
Sabran let fall the wagonflap and shook his head in the

suddenly lonely darkness.
"Not so special after all," he remarked to the empty air. "Just like all the others."
He took a few restless but sure-footed steps in the lightless wagon, and asked the unheeding cargo around him softly, "Manshoon, when will you see Lord Fzoul's way is right? Belief and training and obedience—not ambitious hunger for great power, without delay!"
He stopped, wondering again if the Dread Lord of the Zhentarim had really whispered in the ears of Mhegras, ordering the attack that had just failed. Oh, someone in the caravan had, someone who'd come from the blandreth-dealer's wagon. But who had it been, really?
He whirled and strode back to the wagonflap, then stopped and shook his head. If it hadn't been Manshoon, it didn't matter now who it had been. If it was Manshoon, there was no need to go looking. The Dark Master of the Brotherhood would quite soon find him.
"Sabran." The cold voice came from just beyond the wagonflap. Quite soon, indeed.
The priest caught his breath, and leaned forward to murmur, "Yes, Lord?"
The bowgun-bolt that took him in the face wasn't large— but then, it didn't have to be.
It only had to be small enough to be readily hidden amid blandreths.
"So who d'you think'twas?"
"A wizard," Arauntar growled angrily, V course. Just which jolly merchant that mage was I won't know until we go looking an' counting, come morn—I'm not doing it now. The lad'n' lass are safe, the wagon floor is charred but should hold if we lash a few beams under it, an' blast me if they didn't
wait until I was bedded down, with you lot about forty strides off, an' race in to do their butchery. Beshaba damn them!"

"Huh. Well, Shandril undoubtedly did," Beldimarr said dryly, pointing at the men shuffling uneasily around the fire he'd told them to stay by. "Well, you've seen our new blades. Impressed as much as I am?"
"As they all seem to be able to walk without falling over an' wear swords as if they know how to use 'em, I'd say about half of them'll be Thayan snakes under orders from the Red Wizard Thavaun," Arauntar grunted. "But we expected that. I distinctly remember you telling me we'd be up half the night talking over how to mount guards with so few blades, an' not a new one we can trust. What's really gnawing you?"
Beldimarr cast a wary glance over his shoulder, and then muttered, 'Voldovan. He looked at me like he didn't recognize me for a moment, and when he talks his words are stiff an' somehow careful... something's not quite right."
"Was he out of your sight at all?"
"For a few breaths when a Harper I've never seen before signaled me and gave me a message for Twilight Hall; 'Soon the Three Laws will apply in every city.' Mean anything to you?"
Arauntar shook his head. "No doubt 'twill—in time to come, an' too late to save us any trouble."
He sighed, and shook his head again. "Gods above—Voldovan, too?"
Beldimarr scratched at some private itches. "You expected this life we've chosen to be easy?"
"No," Arauntar grunted, "but I was hoping the gods would serve up the worst entertainments no more'n three disasters at a time, if y'know what I mean. I'm not getting any younger."
Beldimarr shrugged. "If we don't handle this just right, my friend, we'll neither of us be getting any older, either."
"Marlel," said the cold, calm voice out of empty air in front of him, "your patience impresses me."
The Dark Blade of Doom stood very still as icy terror gripped him, but he managed to keep his own voice soft and steady.

"And so?"
"And so I believe I can use you in this little matter of spellfire, rather than destroying you right now. Sit down and pour yourself some of that vile thrusk you're carrying. We must talk."
Marlel was neither a foolish man nor a slow one. He sat down.
Her breath had barely slowed from facing down the shadow-wraith when she heard it again.
Not slowing her quiet, steady walk, Sharantyr felt her little gem-pouch with her fingertips until she'd trapped a particular stone. Drawing it out, she broke it in the approved manner and let its gentle tingling wash over her.
When the gentle feathery feeling was done, the ranger swung her backpack off her shoulder and spun around under the uncaring stars.
A particular bush trembled just a bit more than it should have.
"Come out, whoever you are," she told it wearily. "You've been following me for a long time, and I'm growing tired of your clumsy rustlings."
Silence was her reply.
Sharantyr let it stretch, then sighed and added flatly, "Come out or I'll blast you."
More silence.
Keeping her eyes on the bush, she raised one hand to counterfeit the gestures of a spell, wiggled her fingers just so, and a crossbow bolt whipped out of the night—right into her!
Ironguard or no ironguard, a battle-hardened ranger moves when death comes reaching out of the air. She twisted away with lightning speed—too slow by far—and the war-quarrel flashed through her, biting through her belt right beside Lhaeo's gift and catching in the leather baldric down her back. If she'd been whole, it would have torn right through her. As it was, it certainly looked like it was stuck through

her.
Sharantyr scowled at it and snapped, "Get out here, or I'll blast the whole hillside!"
The bush trembled reluctantly, and a man slowly rose into view, lifting his empty hands tentatively. It was Tornar the Eye.
Sharantyr nodded, her lips thin. "I thought so. Sent by the Master of Shadows to slay me because I Know Too Much, aye?" It was Tornar's turn to nod.
"My patience for being followed is at an end," Sharantyr told him, showing no signs of pain from his crossbow bolt, though it protruded boldly enough from her belt. "Turn around and go home, or I'll slay you." "But... but..."
Sharantyr drew a tiny bone knife from inside the cuff of her left boot, and slashed off a lock of her hair. Her next slash, as she kept her eyes steadily on Tornar, was across the back of her own hand. She licked her little fang clean and put it away again, then held the hair in the blood welling out of the wound she'd made.
His eyes widened, then narrowed. Sharantyr strode straight to him, and held out the bloody lock of hair. "Take
Belgon this, tell him you succeeded, and look to see me no more in Scornubel."
Tornar looked startled, but he nodded, gingerly took the hair, and hastily backed away.
Sharantyr nodded again. "Now go."
Tornar scrambled up the hillside, dodging between bushes, until he reached a bare rocky place a good way off. There he turned in the growing moonlight, smiled crookedly down at the ranger, and called, "Oh, I'll be telling him of my success, rest easy on that. My bolt was poisoned."
"I know," Sharantyr replied, plucking it nonchalantly out—Tornar's eyes widened—breaking it between her fingers—Tornar's eyes grew even larger—and then tossing it into the ditch. "Bloodbite. You should refrain from using a venom half Faerun takes no harm from. All it does is make me itch—to

slay idiots who use it on me."
She ended her words with a pleasant smile and advanced steadily up the hillside at Tornar, until he whirled around and sprinted away.
The lady ranger watched him go, head to one side to listen. When she was quite sure he wasn't circling around again—not nearby, at least—and no other large creature was on the move close at hand, either, Sharantyr resumed her long, solitary walk.
A few paces along the road she told the stars softly, "The gem-dust on that hair will force you away from me for as long as you carry it, Tornar. Wasteful magic, perhaps—but if that wraith comes back, these gems will probably end up as so many crumbling pebbles, and it'll be just my wits and blades against the world."
Her voice was wry, a few steps later, when she added, "That's what it always comes down to."
Another few strides of road fell away behind her before she lifted her head again and asked the stars softly, "I wonder what mages do when their magic fails them or runs out in a fight, and they've never learned swordplay or how to hide or anything else?"
As usual, the stars declined to answer.

FIRE IN THE NIGHT

When fire leaps up in the night, best have blade ready to hand. Dwarves, men, and elves all seem to feel better when they die doing something—even if it's just screaming and running. Considerate ores and dragons know this and blow trumpets or roar to give their victims time to get properly ready.

Belmast Thaurondur, Scrollmaster of Suzail
Don't Let It Be Forgot: A Scribe's Life
Year of the Haunting Harpy

Few folk in Triel had even seen the grandest table in town. It gleamed mirror-smooth and bright in a heavily guarded upper room of a granary Elvar had died thinking

still held the best cheeses, wines, and smoked meats he'd been able to assemble.
Its new owners had tossed the foodstuffs down the stairs like so much rubble, readying the room for more important uses.
Sitting around a great table staring at a lone tlame dancing in the air by their heads, for instance.
A man with a face like coldly angry stone and the smallest of razor-straight beards tufting the corners of his jaw leaned forward and asked, "Highest, what should we do now?"
"Unfold to me who on this caravan and harrying it is seeking spellfire—agents, not dreaming-of-luck merchants or hireswords. Everyone from the outset at Scornubelrnot just who's still in the hunt now."
The stone-faced man cast a glance along the table. Another man caught it reluctantly, leaned forwai'd with a nervous throat-clearing, and said, "H-highest, here are all the ah, players, as we see them. Firstly, those attacking the caravan. Thoadrin of the Cult of the Dragon, and his warriors. He and one survive and have turned back, or so we believe."
"As do I. Proceed."
"Rendilar Bluthlock of Scornubel, leading a force of rogues of his city, probably at the behest of the Master of Shadows. All now perished or fled. The Master sent two other agents after the caravan—a woman unfamiliar to us, openly on horseback, and his most trusted spy, Tornar the Eye. They've not yet caught up to the wagons."
"You know of no one else lurking in the Blackrocks, preparing attack?"
"N-no, Highest. A second group are those keeping watch over the caravan. We suspect someone of the Arcane Brotherhood is aware of the movements of Shandril Shessair but know no one for certain. Yet."
"Other watchers being the Cult, independent rabble of no account, and the Zhentarim?"
"Yes, Highest. So far as we can tell, no one oversees the Cultists along on the caravan. They are left to their own

devices and report back later,"
"If they can."
/Aji—yes, nignest, indeed, inis leaves tne Znentarim, and of them we've managed to farscry the wizards Korthauvar Hammantle and Hlael Toraunt, who are working together and reporting to the mage Drauthtar Inskirl."
"A veteran of internal Zhent skirmishes, not to be understimated by the sensible."
"Indeed so. Inskirl seems to be under the command of Eirhaun Sooundaeril, called 'The Maimed Wizard' by his fellow Zhentarim."
"Whom he spies on, seeking treacheries to report to Manshoon. I hear hesitation in your voice. Hold back nothing!"
"Y-yes, Highest. There's another wizard of the Zhentarim involved, but we know not how: Hesperdan. They all seem to fear him, yet he spurns orders and lackeys."
"Ah. Yes, he's to be feared, perhaps even more than Manshoon and Fzoul, though he has a habit of vanishing for decades at a time, leaving all affairs untouched. Watch him as closely as you dare."
"Ah—it shall be done, Highest. This brings us to agents in the caravan. We may not have uncovered all but are confident we've found everyone of consequence." "Unfold them to me."
"Indeed. The Cult may have lost all its spellfire seekers. They numbered four warriors—one named Brasker, another Holvan—and a wizard and a thief working together, Malivur and Krostal. Krostal was well known to us; a capable and dangerous man. He told Malivur he recognized a 'far more powerful' Cult mage posing as a merchant of the caravan, but we've not yet identified who. This unknown wizard is probably the only Cult agent left." "And the Zhents?"
"Reduced to three ambitious but weak magelings, we believe: Deverel, Jalarrak, and Rostol. We don't yet know which of the caravan merchants each is. Dead already are two

priests of Bane, Stlarakur and Sabran—the most formidable Zhent, in our judgment—and the wizards Mhegras, Praulgar, and Aumlar."
"The last won himself a not inconsiderable reputation . . . but such accomplishments usually pave roads to early graves."
"Indeed, Highest. He nearly slew our Pheldred, after Pheldred attacked him; a personal matter, we believe."
"I agree. Anyone else?"
"Y-yes, Highest, there is one other."
The stone-faced man nodded at another mage, who went swiftly to the door, unlocked it, and ushered in a man who was smiling.
The flame above the table danced a handspan or so in his . direction, and seemed to flare a little brighter. "You would be Marlel," said the Highest in a dry voice. "The Dark Blade of Doom."
Marlel sat down in the seat of the man who'd been sent to fetch him, leaving that mage hovering uncertainly, and replied, "Every man in my profession needs a more memorable name than the one given at birth. Just as you are now 'Highest' and less often 'Hulrivior.'
There was a sharp intake of breath around the table, but the voice from the flame seemed almost amused as it said, "You learn what you must, I see. How is it that you became interested in me and found your way to this table?"
"I suspect I'm the most capable survivor of Voldovan's caravan who might be induced to work with ... you of Thay. I was personally known to one of your mages here in Triel, from, let us say, 'earlier escapades.' Coin has changed hands, and I fear I've clean forgotten whatever former reason or alliance I may have had for accompanying this particular string of wagons and suddenly come to the conclusion that, for the good of all Faerun, no less a capable mage than a Red Wizard should command spellfire."
"Commendable," the Highest commented. "How, in your incisive, professional view, should we of Thay come to

possess spellfire?"
"By using me to strike at the right time and in the right manner," Marlel replied, lowering his voice and leaning forward over the table. Most of the other men seated there did the same, eager to hear whatever secrets he was obviously about to unfold. "And," he said, opening his hand, "there's this."
Something small and gemlike gleamed in his palm—for the instant before Marlel's smile widened, and he flung the small something right into the flame, hurling himself and his chair over backward in the same motion.
The room exploded in streamers of white fire, and the man called the Dark Blade of Doom rolled away from the table and up to his feet with a wand in his hand while headless bodies were still reeling at the table and other men were screaming and clutching at sightless eyes.
Coolly he used the wand to blast faces and hands wherever he saw them, ridding the room of foes who could do him harm. Patiently he waited for the smoke and the afterimages still dancing before his own eyes to clear.
The flame above the table was gone, and if his little secret had worked as it was supposed to, the Red Wizard Hulrivior, wherever his smoking body might now be, was "Highest" no more.
Marlel smiled softly down at the last two Thayans still living, as they writhed on the floor, staring first at the smoking stumps where their hands had been, then at the man who'd dealt them such maiming.
As their curses faded into weary groans, he announced, "I did forget to warn you of one little matter: I'd already met with a Red Wizard, one who pays rather better than Highest. Please accept my apologies for the misunderstanding, and the mess. I confess I care little about acting so boldly or being seen as treacherous, but coins guide the Dark Blade of Doom. As I don't expect to live very long to enjoy them, I seek to please myself, day by day. Slaying a room full of

rivals and cruel mages ... now that pleases me."
He aimed the wand at his wounded audience and triggered it again.
"Well, now!" Korthauvar Hammantle said, as the scrying magic faded and he sat back to grin at his fellow Zhentarim. "This is rich!"
"Yes," Hlael agreed, shaking his head, "but how did Marlel get yon magic? And stay alive to make an agreement with anyone!"
"Ah," said a soft voice from the shadows behind them. "That would be my doing."
Korthauvar and Hlael froze, suddenly ice-cold and dry-mouthed. They knew that voice even before the old man in the dusty maroon robes and the long-pointed shoes shuffled forward into the light: Hesperdan!
Korthauvar was still trying to swallow as the old wizard smiled and added, "Now, I think, it's time for you to stop watching and to go and fetch me spellfire. There's no need to farspeak Drauthtar or delay any longer. Just go and do it."
He raised a bony, green-veined hand in which a strange scepter glowed and flickered, and whispered, "Now."
It was bright and cloudless as they left Triel, but the Trade Way seemed deserted. As the creaking, groaning wagons rolled on, Voldovan eyed every bush and nearby crag suspiciously—as Narm and Shandril knew all too well, for they sat on the perch beside him, guiding the beasts of his wagon. As the hours passed without incident, the caravan master grew more tense and wary rather than less so. When they stopped to water the beasts and refill skins at a roadside stream, he was almost dancing with tension.
Yet no crossbow quarrels came humming out of the Blackrocks, and no beasts pounced, called, or even showed themselves on the heights. Once a merchant thought he saw the tiny shape of a dragon aloft, flying very high, but when he shouted and pointed, no one else caught sight of it.
"Dragons," Orthil Voldovan growled, caressing the already

glassy-smooth bone hilt of his handy belt-dagger with white-knuckled hands. "That's all I need!"

Just after the sun had started its long descent, they passed another caravan heading the other way—a fast-moving group of uniform wagons guarded by hard-eyed men in chainmail, all in matching hats and surcoats. Voldovan raised a hand in salute as they thundered past and growled, "Costers!" into the dust-cloud they left in their wake, as if it was the dirtiest oath imaginable.

The dust got into everything. Shandril's hair felt like the gnarled roots of some dead, dried-out plant. It left everyone coughing and spitting, but when they rumbled clear of it the road was as deserted as before, and Arauntar blew a horn-call announcing his intention to pick up the pace. Voldovan merely nodded, and slowly, wagon after wagon, drovers using their whips, reins, and voices got their beasts up to a near-gallop.

Once more they bounced and thundered along, rocking dangerously, until Shandril shouted to the caravan master, "Is this prudent? You remember what happened last time!"

"If we're attacked, lass, 'twon't matter how fast we're going ... might even make a few brigands think twice about daring to dispute with us," was the reply.

As the day wore on, the wheels turned, no misfortune fell, and it seemed as if Arauntar had been wise ... for as the shadows grew long and the sun glimmered low behind distant crags, the veteran guard blew another, triumphant horn-blast, signaling all to slow, and turned his wagon up a side-trail onto a large, tilted plateau.

"This'll be where that coster run broke camp, this morn," Voldovan growled in satisfaction. "We've made good time!"

Narm and Shandril exchanged glances and smiles—wry grins that told each other wordlessly that they were both expecting more trouble in the night to come. The wagons' around them seemed to hold an endless supply of bold men seeking spellfire. '

Voldovan evidently thought so too. His first words as he swung down from the perch to see to the horses, before Narm could rise to help him or Shandril slip out the other side to chock the wheels, was "Try to stay out o' trouble this night, the pair of ye, hmm? I'll be sleeping first watch, and would appreciate yer keeping the slap'n'tickle and hurling of spells and cooking folk alive with spellfire to a minimum, hey?"

Narm and Shandril traded more glances, in which eyes were rolled expressively.

The dust cloud ahead was coming her way, fast.

Sharantyr watched it with narrowed eyes, then sighed, hurried down into the deepest part of the ditch, and flattened herself against the ground in the lee of a large rock. A coster caravan, coming fast. They'd ride her down with barely a shrug or put a quarrel through her at first sight for fear she might be some brigand lure.

The cloud grew, and with it a rumble that swiftly grew louder, shaking the ground her cheek was pressed against. She closed her eyes against the dust and waited for the din to simply pass over and leave her—in the dust, of course. She'd be choking on it for some time, as she walked in the wake of the hard-driven wagons.

"Shan, Shan," she asked the stone in front of her wryly, "couldn't you just have settled down in Shadowdale and endangered us all there?"

Then the Knight of Myth Drannor shut her mouth tight, for the storm was upon her. Close by her head plunging hooves and wheel after wheel thundered, the tumbling dust so thick that it stung her skin, the rattling of loose cargo and wagon-chains briefly deafening. The tumult lessened as it left her behind, roaring on south toward Triel.

She'd almost caught up to Voldovan there but she'd had to get water and walk far enough beyond Triel that the inevitable lurking outlaws wouldn't decide she'd be easy

prey while she slept. When at last Sharantyr found bare rock to leave the road on and cover beyond, she simply had to sleep. She was still weary now, but she was no longer staggering and finding her eyes drooping shut at every third stride. It would be so easy to just lie here, and sleep . ..

Aye, and be dined upon by the first night-prowling beast that followed her scent along the road.

With another sigh the ranger rolled over and up—and found herself staring at the still-quivering wreckage of a freshly crashed wagon. A wounded horse was thrashing in the road, others were trying to kick their way clear of their harness and away from the bodies of their dead fellows, and the brigands who'd wrought this were darting down from the rocks a dozen strong, or more.

"Kisses upon you, Tymora!" Sharantyr gasped. She'd been only a few strides from walking right under their noses—and by the looks of all the coster outriders sprawled in the road with quarrels standing up out of their backs, she'd have died wearing enough bolts to look like a
porcupine.

Three surviving outriders were spurring desperately past her and away, one wearing a quarrel in the shoulder. The brigands wasted no time chasing them. They were already swording the kicking, twisting horse that had gone down—and the drover struggling to get out from under a tangle of harness beside it, too.

Other brigands plunged into the wagon and came out again with blankets and cloaks to toss over the heads of the horses they judged salvageable. There was a brief tumult of wrestling with frightened beasts, swearing, rolling away from deadly hooves ... then the hooded horses quieted down to stamping and snorting where they stood, still harnessed. The brigands got down to serious looting. Nigh everyone charged into the wagon, and there were crashings, blows, and shouts of pleased discovery. Sharantyr sidled up behind the one man still outside and hastily ducked away behind

the horses when he finally decided to turn and look down the road to make sure no one was coming back from the caravan for their missing wagon.
Calmly, as if she'd every right to be there, Sharantyr cut horse after horse out of harness, taking calm measure of each as she did so. When she'd settled on the one that looked the strongest, she sprang up onto its back. As it reared and bugled its surprise, she plucked the cloak from over its head and dropped it over the astonished face of that last brigand, following it with a hard kick to his jaw that almost unhorsed her. She got a good fistful of mane, and as the horse reared again she kicked out at other horses. One promptly bolted,
and that set them all off, Sharantyr using her utmost strength to get the head of her chosen mount around the way she wanted it to go.
By the time the brigands inside the wagon had finished shouting profane queries and emerged from their plundering, Sharantyr of Shadowdale was riding hard along the road. North, in pursuit of Shandril Shessair—and spellfire.
It had evidently been years since this large thunderhooves had felt a rider on its back, and though she undoubtedly weighed less than the wagons it pulled, she was less than welcome. It tossed its head and tried to reach around and * bite her almost ceaselessly as the hills rose and fell beneath its hooves. Its ungainly gait started out weary and progressed through plodding to staggering until eventually Sharantyr tired of its plaintive snorting and tottering progress and swung herself down from its back.
She patted its flank as it tried a half-hearted kick in her direction and told it, "Sorry, old bones. Take your ease . . . until the wolves find you, I guess. Still, you'd soon be - roasting over a brigand fire if you weren't free now."
She ran a few steps to get clear of its hooves and teeth, then resumed walking.

When the ranger glanced back at it, the wagon-horse gave her a choice look and started plodding along after her. Sharantyr smiled, grinned, and led the way. North, toward spellfire—and trouble, if she knew anything about Shandril.
The horse sighed heavily, saving her the trouble.
The merchant who was really a Red Wizard knew he was working alone now, and the farther he got from Triel, the less aid he could call on. The time was as right as it would ever be. He also knew just which of the guards hired in Triel
could be relied upon to see nothing when he emerged from his wagon at night to cast a spell, such as the one he was weaving now.
The plateau resembled a gigantic tilted coin, high side nigh the road and low side to the west, so all he'd had to do was get himself to the row of rocks overlooking the road and the slumber-gas created by his spell would drift down over the entire camp. Sleeping men stop few wizards, and men unable to awaken stop even fewer. Put a dagger through the right throats, and spellfire might be his very soon.
"Asarandu? he said carefully, ending the incantation, and spread his arms wide. From them flowed a greenish, purplish gas, billowing like smoke from a quickening fire, but heavy, tumbling to the ground in front of him. It built back up to above his head before it started to drift west, downslope, toward the wagons.
Now, if the wind would just hold off and none of the guards not already in his purse raised the alarm too soon ...
He strolled back to his wagon as if nothing was amiss— and indeed, to his lungs there was no spell-spun gas at all— and waited there, drawn dagger hidden in his sleeve. No one cried out, no errant breeze arose. This was going to work!
A guard took two bored steps away from a wagon, then crumpled and fell headlong to the ground. Over yonder, another.
Yes. Soon, now .. .
Two guards turned their heads, hearing the thump of

another hitting the ground. They peered, shrugged and sagged in unison, muttered banter forgotten.
The wizard stepped cautiously to where he could look across the camp. The spellfire wench was in Voldovan's wagon, and it sported four guards at its corners, one of them taking Red Wizard coins.
There was no point in slitting throats here, there, and everywhere across the caravan. The two head guards and Voldovan
himself should be his first victims, then anyone not asleep or trying to cast a spell—Shandril's mate last, in case he should be needed as a hostage to her good behavior.
One of the guards by the wagon fell over, then another. The third asked them sharply what was wrong before falling on his face, so walking openly across the field toward that wagon might not be the brightest tactic, now.
Ah, but who was left?
The Red Wizard drew in a deep breath and started on his journey, heading for another wagon well off to one side. From there he could turn toward the one he sought. As he went, he kept a sharp watch for other men on the move in the spell-smoke. The camp was entirely enveloped by his magic now.
He reached the wagon—dark, still, and silent, with three bodies sprawled about its perch amid dragondroon cards scattered where they'd fallen from nerveless hands. He recognized a guard who'd been along since Scornubel. Not one of the two battered veterans, but a longtime rider with Voldovan. He drew the man a new smile across his throat, stepped hastily back to keep clear of the welling blood, wiped his dagger on the man's jerkin, and went on.
On toward Voldovan's own wagon, where spellfire waited. Along the way he passed a fallen guard who'd been hired in Triel—not one loyal to Thay, but who'd probably not leap to defend a caravan patron in battle, either—and left the man lying, unharmed. He might not have very long to strike if

someone had resisted his spell or shaken off its effects. Some folk always did.
His spell had driven down the last of the dew, and the trampled grass was wet and slippery underfoot. The Red Wizard walked as carefully and quietly as he knew how, dagger hidden in his sleeve again, hardly daring to hope it was going to be this easy.
Yet no one stirred as he reached the first of the guards and turned the man over with his foot. The man of Thay. He went to the next and slit that guard's throat with quickening excitement. Now, around to the front . . . spellfire must lie less than a dozen feet away, his for the taking. -..,-
"A spell, yes, but what? Not a cloudkill, surely!" Korthauvar frowned, peering over the rocks.
"Whatever 'tis, I'm not letting it touch me" Hlael muttered. "Not while I have the means to break—ho! Look there!"
"Falling . . . dead or asleep," the taller Zhentarim said slowly, backing away from the rocks. "Slumbering men are easy enough to slay .. . and we could walk right in and take spellfire, with all of them snoring."
"Someone's trying that already and will be ready for us or anyone," Hlael hissed fiercely, "and that's if yon spell doesn't take us down!"
He retreated until he stood in a clear, level area on the very lip of the drop to the road below. There he shook out his sleeves and announced, "Stand back, Kor. I'm going to break that spell. Look, it's spilling over the rocks at us already!"
Korthauvar nodded. "Do so, without delay, or spellfire may be snatched from under our very hand after all."
Hlael nodded grimly. "Not something I'd like to have to explain to Hesperdan, if he isn't watching us right now." He raised his hands, and began his casting.
"He is," Korthauvar of the Zhentarim muttered to himself, casting a quick look around at the night. "Oh, he is."
The dagger plunged in, the Red Wizard winced and pulled, and another throat bled. He shuddered. A good fireball, now,

or lightning to hurl men shrieking, left them just as dead, but not this . . . this . . . boarlike butchery . . . He set his teeth as his gorge rose, shook his head, and went on.

There was but one guard more, draped over a corner of the wagon-perch, Voldovan's boots beside him. The caravan master had fallen back inside his wagon where all was dark and still. The Thayan eyed that dark gap cautiously. Dare he hope the spellfire-wench and her mate slept, too?

Best stick to the plan. The guard first, then Voldovan— then truss the young mage and have him out of the wagon and away into the night. If she awakened while he was still out hunting the two veteran guards, he'd have a hold over her . . . and even if the caravan went on, she'd stay to search for her Narm. 'Twould just be a matter of waiting, as she clambered and peered and called in vain, until exhaustion took her into real slumber, and he could enspell her at will.

The Red Wizard smiled, stepped forward, raised his dagger— and the guard's eyes snapped open! The armsman growled, "What the—?" Around them, the camp erupted into life and sound—a chorus of curses and bewilderment.

The guard glared at the mage with the knife and bellowed, "Attack! Voldovaaaan!"

The Red Wizard sprang back, snapped out a hasty incantation as the guard's sword rang out, and was gone, back beside his own wagon before he'd even had time to curse. He made up for that now.

"Beshaba spit on all!" he roared, charging up its steps and inside. The camp was in an uproar, the guard couldn't have failed to recognize him. The thud of pounding, running feet was rising in his ears already. He had to get his spellbooks and begone, before—

A sword slashed open the cloth across the wagon windows, and a furious voice shouted, "There he is!" ,

Men in the worn leather and rusty chain of caravan guards came boiling through the mouth of the wagon, and the Red Wizard turned with a snarl on his lips and a wand in his hand

and gave them death.
The front of the wagon burst forth in a bright flood of flame and broken bodies that brought Arauntar running, and other men, too, with drawn swords in their hands. "Magic!" someone shouted. "Always bloody magic!"
Another merchant who was also a wizard saw his chance and hurled lightning, but Arauntar wore more leather than steel, and one of Voldovan's recent hires took the crackling bolt instead. That guard staggered, clawed the air, and went over on his back, outlined in spitting blue-white sparks.
The Zhentarim cursed and threw up his hands to cast another spell, but Arauntar ducked behind a snorting group of hobbled, frightened horses, and bellowed, "Guards! To me! That wagon—have the man out of it, and down dead! 'Ware spells!"
Men were shouting all over the camp now, and running with swords and daggers out. Shandril Shessair came to the mouth of Voldovan's wagon white to the lips and fire-eyed in fury.
Another Zhentarim hurled a fireball at her from his own wagon. Shandril saw the tiny streak of flame hurtling toward her and smashed it back with spellfire.
A great burst of flame shot up into the night where spell and spellfire met, spitting streamers in all directions like a Lantanna firework, and billowed up in a plume of brilliance that lit the tilted field as bright as day.
In its radiance the Red Wizard could be seen fleeing the smoldering wreck of his wagon, trotting away downslope.
Shandril set her lips in a thin line and sent him spellfire.
In all the shouting and waving of blades, no one saw a thin cloud, like a cloak of shadows, descending silently out of the night, but everyone noticed when the plume of flame suddenly went dark and dwindled. No eye failed to see when something dimmed the spellfire that was clawing at a screaming Thayan.
Darkness roiled silently, as if in pain, spellflames whirling

away in all directions. Shandril's streamer of spellfire faded, and shrank back.
Shandril's eyes widened in astonishment as she watched, and from the Zhent's wagon came a harsh laugh and another spell.
Lightning spat across the trampled sward, seeking the life of Shandril Shessair, but the shadow swooped, and the bolt darkened, sank, and died ... as if something had devoured it.
"Get to that god-rotting wagon!" Arauntar roared, and the Zhentarim burst out of his door and fled away across the field, just as the Red Wizard had.
Arauntar cursed, flung his sword, and watched it bounce far short. The wizard looked back and laughed. He was still laughing as he came to a crashing halt with Beldimarr's blade through him, and the fiercely grinning Harper at the other end of it.
"Ho!" he called, as the dying wizard gurgled and slid down his dark, wet steel, clawing vainly at it, "I don't know what's drinking magic, but 'tis a night for sword-swingers at last! Where's that murdering mage?"
"Gone that way!" Arauntar called, pointing with his dagger, as he came running to scoop up his sword. "You go after him, an' I'll see to the lass!"
All around them, the fighting was getting personal and bloody. Some merchants had fear or temper enough to get out
blades and join the fray. Others ordered their bully-blades to defend their wagons. Guards snapped orders, were defied, and replied with sword-thrusts.
"Go!" Beldimarr shouted, shoving Arauntar back toward Voldovan's wagon. "Look!"
Arauntar spun around and saw, cursed bitterly, and put his head down and ran.
A dozen swordsmen were whirling around Voldovan's wagon like a dark storm, fencing with each other and the snarling, already wounded caravan master. Whenever they had a

moment free from fending off hostile steel, they plunged their blades hilt-deep in the cloth sides of the wagon, thrusting hard at whoever might be within. Arauntar heard at least one startled scream from Shandril and a wild shouting that was probably Narm trying to cast a spell—and finding to his horror that nothing happened.

As the Harper ran, faster and harder than he'd ever sprinted in his life before, he clearly heard the young mage's next words: a Tis here, Shan! In here with us! Some sort of dark—thing!"

"My knife does nothing to it," Shandril gasped, as Arauntar pounded nearer and Voldovan sank back on his perch with a sob of pain, bleeding in two places and with eager swordsmen pressing in for the kill. One of them—gods blast him!—was a guard just hired in Triel!

The Harper arrived hacking a neck here, a face there and had those men down or reeling back in two swift, panting moments.

"Try flame on it!" Shandril was crying, inside the wagon. "The lantern!"

Narm's reply was a roar of pain, mingled with Shandril's scream. A moment later, they reeled out onto the perch. A moment after that, Arauntar saw why.

Someone had got hold of a long lance—a horse lance, cargo from one of the wagons—and thrust it through the back of Voldovan's wagon. The slashed, flapping-down back of Narm's clothing and the bloody bared skin beneath told clearly enough where it had scored.

Arauntar went for that man with a roar, hoping to distract him from cutting his own door through the wagon-back and clambering up inside. The moment the Harper was gone from the front of the wagon, someone hurled a blade out of the night and hit Voldovan in the face with it. The startled caravan master fell off the perch, leaving the way clear to the young couple inside.

Three swordsmen surged forward as one, with an eager roar,

and from out of the night, hair streaming behind her, came a woman none of them had ever seen before. A long, slender sword gleamed in one of her hands and there was a dagger in the other. She crashed into them from one side, driving them together into a confused tangle of steel by the sheer fury of her charge.

"For Myth Drannor!" Sharantyr cried. "For Shadowdale!" Her blade clanged, crashed, and sang again. A man groaned and fell over dying. Shandril peered out of the wagon in wonder, calling, "Sharantyr?"

One of the other swordsmen howled in glee and hurled his dagger at the spellfire-wench. Narm sprang desperately in front of his lady and smashed the weapon aside with his arm. It clanged away off the wagon, and he winced and sank down, Shandril clutching him and drawing him back inside.

By then, Sharantyr had sworded another swordsman, leaving only the one who'd thrown his knife. He eyed her, took a pace back, raised his blade warningly, and acquired a sudden look of wild pain.

A moment later he came crashing at her, running right onto her blade and hurling her aside.

The swordsman smashed into the perch like a Waterdha-vian street-puppet, loose-limbed and dangling, and fell aside, already dead. Behind him stood the two mages who'd driven him forward, the talons of a huge spell-spun claw floating in the air before them. Sharantyr tugged at her sword, trying to fend off the deadly thing, but even as she snarled and hauled it free of the dead man, a darkness fell upon the claw and it faded. The two wizards stepped back in alarm.

The crash and skirl of swords from the rear of the wagon told of Arauntar's battle with the men who'd been attacking there. As if avoiding that fray, Narm and Shandril came again to the wagon-mouth and saw Sharantyr advancing on the two wizards.

Both of the Zhentarim drew daggers and threw them. The ranger shifted her blade coolly, and both hurled knives

clanged away harmlessly into the night.
She smiled grimly, took another step toward the men— and Arauntar came around the side of the wagon with a roar and hurled himself on Sharantyr.
"No!" Shandril screamed. "Arauntar, no! She's a friend!"
Sparks flew as whirling blades met, two very swift steel-wielders twisted and darted and lunged. Over them, Korthauvar of the Zhentarim smiled tightly and flung another dagger.
Narm caught this one in his arm, deep and quivering. He snarled, and before Shandril could stop him, sprang out over Arauntar in a furious leap that carried him right onto Korthauvar's toes.
As the wizard roared in pain, tried to leap back, and lost his balance as his pinned feet were freed unevenly, Narm snatched the man's dagger out of his own arm and gave it back to the Zhent as he fell on top of him. Twice, hard and deep, in the neck and throat. '. : •
Korthauvar Hammantle gasped, gulped, choked, and could not stop choking. He convulsed, flopping about on the ground like a fish cast up out of the water with his own blood like iron in his mouth ... an endless flood of it. Frantically he reached up to Hlael for aid ... and died seeing Hlael Toraunt shaking his head grimly and pitilessly and backing away.

A FAILING HAND OF FLAMES

Even the mightiest wither and falter. It just takes longer for them to be laid low than those unfortunates they can send warriors to harvest for them. Hold this thought as consolation when the King's blades burst through your door.
Malivur Stonecastle
Fallen From Grace: A Cormyrean Noble's
Year of the Dracorage

Hlael Toraunt ran as he'd never run in his life before. Even that young Tamaraith fool might be able to scorch him with a spell, and if the guard Arauntar caught up with him ... well, he didn't want to ever get to know what a few feet of hard,

cold steel sliding through his guts felt like.
He needed warriors—men sworn to the Brotherhood and as good with blades as these ragtag caravan guards. The Zhent magelings had some, and he needed them, now. If he had to blast a few Brother wizards to ashes to get them,
well ... it wasn't as it the Krotnernooa iauK.eu a surplus ui such dolts. . . .
Panting, Hlael rounded the wagon that held Deverel of the Zhentarim, masquerading as a dealer in cheeses from Elturel. He skidded to a halt as the point of a ready sword thrust up almost into his face.
"Yes?" its owner asked coldly. "You have business with Master Rinthar?"
Hlael drew in a deep breath, met the Zhentilar's cold regard with ice of his own, and said, "Yes. Tell him it's his brother—the one called Deverel. I've come from Manshoon, and I'd like to buy some cheese!"
"Stop!" Shandril yelled, into the storm of steel. "Stop, or you'll kill each other!"
She spat a tiny line of spellfire between their snarling faces, to make them heed—and it worked. Arauntar reeled back, blinking, and risked a quick glance in her direction. "Well, aye, Lass, when you take steel to someone, that's the usual aim," he growled.
"Gods, no," the maid of Highmoon cried. "Not you two!"
Sharantyr and Arauntar stared at her, and then at each other over their blades, blinked, and asked more or less in unison, "So who by Leira the Deceiver are you?"
Arauntar lurched up to the wagon, waved a weary arm back at the pole-lanterns flickering behind him—one of a small legion of such that now lit the camp with their glows— and growled, "That's the last of 'em lit. Order reigns. I doubt there's a man or maid in camp still asleep, but most of 'em are uacK in meir wagons an' not running around burying blades in each other any longer .. . for now."
"Good," Orthil Voldovan grunted." 'Now' is all I'm worried

about, until morning. Why by all the drunken dancing gods every man along on this run feels the need to butcher the next man every chance he gets, I know not, but—"

He fell silent and strode past Sharantyr and her raised and ready blade to glare at a man who staggered as he approached. "An' what by Beshaba's bright smile befell ye?"

Beldimarr managed a grin that would have been more handsome if blood hadn't bubbled from between his teeth and leaked in a long stream out of the corner of his mouth.

"Jus' a lucky thrust," he panted, as he reeled up to them, clutching his side with a hand whose fingers were slick with blood. "I took him down, mind—an' he was a Zhentilar, or I'm a dead man."

"I hope he was a Zhentilar," Arauntar said grimly, running to guide his friend to the wagon-perch. They didn't make it before Beldimarr went to his knees.

The head guard looked up from where he knelt beside his sagging comrade to ask Shandril roughly, "Lass?"

Shandril stared down at Beldimarr, then at Arauntar's grim gaze, and at the guards gathering around as if by magic, and all the color slowly went out of her face. "No," she gasped, shaking her head. "Oh, no!"

The wizard Rathrane drifted away from the lanterns, writhing and shuddering in pain. Sometimes he seemed almost solid, a dark man in dark robes, cloak billowing out impossibly long from his shoulders. More often he was but shifting, batlike shadows, roiling in pain around something

bright and flickering in his midst, something tnat hurt, mm but that he cradled as if it was precious.

Such agony, unending . . . but he had to have this. How could he not hunger for such power? He must learn from these last few wisps of spellflame, as they flickered out in his grasp, how to adapt himself so as to drain this peerless might without harm . . . like so. Yes! Thus! This was the way.

The caravan master glared at the slip of a girl kneeling on his wagon-perch and growled disbelievingly, "Ye won't heal

him? Why not? Ye did before!"
He took an angry step forward and found himself facing Sharantyr's swordtip.
"Dare to use that on me, Lady Whomever-Ye-Be, an' ye'll end up a mite diced by yon blades," he snarled, waving at the gathered guards.
"Dare to menace Shandril Shessair, and you'll be dead, and it'll be a mite late for you to take comfort in whatever may happen to me," the ranger replied coolly, lifting her blade to —almost—kiss his throat.
Voldovan jerked back as if he'd burned himself in a suddenly flaring fire, looked up at the wagon-perch, and found himself meeting Narm Tamaraith's furious glare. The caravan master swallowed whatever he'd been going to say and took another pace back.
"Bel," Shandril said pleadingly, "I daren't try to heal you. My spellfire is out of control! I could end up killing you!"
"I trust you, lass," he gasped, blood bubbling forth with every word.
"You shouldn't," Shandril wept, shaking her head violently. "Oh, Bel, you shouldn't!"
"Heal him!" one of the guards snapped. "Aye, try it," another echoed. "Y'did it before!" "Heal him," others muttered, as Voldovan nodded. Shandril bit her lip and shook her head, face twisted.
"Please, lass," Beldimarr gasped from where he sat in Arauntar's arms, fresh blood fountaining forth.
"He's a dead man if you don't, lass," Arauntar growled, and Shandril sighed, shut her eyes, shook her head again— and came down from the wagon.
"I... this is not going to go well," she moaned, going to her knees beside the stricken guard. "I don't want to do this!"
"We all have to do things we don't want to do, lass," Voldovan growled. "Get on with it."
Shandril gave the caravan master a tearful look, turned imploringly to the guards, and whispered, "You don't

understand, any of you!"
"Please, lass," Arauntar growled, leaning forward as if to put a comforting hand on her shoulder, but sitting back even before Sharantyr's sword lifted warningly. "None of us'll blame you if Bel goes down. He'll be dead very soon if you try nothing."
Shandril nodded wearily and looked into Beldimarr's eyes. "I... do you .. ."
The wounded Harper managed a bloody smile, and said, ""Whatever befalls, Shan, 'twill be a relief. Do it, an' if the gods gather me, well then ..."
Shandril nodded slowly, swallowed, and whispered, "Very well. I'll try." She closed her eyes and held out one hand. Spellflames licked and flickered up and down her arm immediately, charring her tunic, before flaring brightly from her fingertips.
Shandril bit her lip and brought her hand down on Beldimarr's bared and bloodsoaked side.
There was a loud sizzling, as blood scorched up into
smoke. Beldimarr jerked upright in Arauntar's grasp and screamed hoarsely.
That long, agonized cry ended with him staring fixedly at Shandril, as smoke streamed out of his mouth—and when Arauntar laid him gently back down, his stare never changed.
The guards leaned forward, but not a man took a step closer to the woman kneeling on the grass as she started to sob.
They could all see Beldimarr wasn't breathing. Where his gaping wound had been, the blood was gone. In its place was a deep brand in the shape of Shandril's hand. "Gods," a guard said hoarsely. "A hand of fire!" "Cooked his innards," another muttered. Shandril stared pleadingly into Arauntar's eyes as she wept. "Lass," he said quickly, his voice raw, "you did what you could." She shook her head despairingly, sprang to her feet, and fled into the wagon, the ashes of her tunic trailing behind her in a scattering, drifting cloud.

Narm moved to block the wagon-mouth, his face bleak. Voldovan took two deliberate steps forward until he was stopped by Sharantyr's blade again, and said grimly over it, "Guard her close, lad. She hasn't many friends standing here right now, if ye know what I mean!"

The young wizard swallowed, nodded, and disappeared into the wagon.

Arauntar rose from his knees beside Beldimarr and said heavily, "Get to yer posts, men. I'll stand guard here."

"No," Voldovan said curtly, "Ye're needed to keep our verges tight, beyond the lanterns. Yon lass hardly needs guarding, with spellfire ready in her hands!"

Arauntar gave the caravan master a dark look but nodded and turned away. "Let no man touch Beldimarr's body," he snapped, whirling around again. "I'll see to it."

Voldovan nodded. "'Twill be so." He waved a hand in dismissal, more to the last few lingering guards than to Arauntar, then turned to Sharantyr and asked, "Are ye going to stand here in my own camp and menace me with steel all night, woman? Mind telling me yer name, first?"

"I am Sharantyr," she said, "Knight of Myth Drannor— and death to any who seek to harm Shandril Shessair."

"Well, then, Lady Death," the caravan master said gruffly, "/ am Orthil Voldovan, this is my caravan, and in this camp, my word is law. Remember that."

The ranger lifted her shoulders in a shrug, lowered her voice so only he could hear, and said coldly, "I met Orthil Voldovan once, and I'm not looking at him now."

The caravan master's eyes went flat and dark, and he raised a hand as if to—do something that he abandoned in an instant, to let it fall again as he smiled and said, "Ye're welcome in my wagon, Lady, but forgive me if I turn not my back on ye, hey?"

"Likewise," she promised him calmly, her eyes as icy as his own.

She ducked past him and under his wagon like a speeding

arrow. He was still whirling around, mouth open to roar, when she burst up into view again with a man dangling from her swordtip.

A robed wizard Voldovan had never seen before was gurgling his last breaths with Sharantyr's long sword through his throat.

Men with swords and bowguns and better armor than they should have possessed showing here and there through their leathers and cloth tunics raced around the corner of the wagon and recoiled from the sight of their newfound commander with his head crazily askew, dying.

The ranger shook Hlael Toraunt off her sword to the ground and told them bleakly, "Shandril's not unguarded. Go down, wolves!"

The Master of Shadows looked up from his littered desk with anger glittering in his pale eyes. The movement lifted his jowls from his mountainous chest, but the man in the doorway was too weary and in far too much pain to feel revulsion or take heed of warning signs. "Master," he croaked, "I've returned!"

Belgon Bradraskor crooked a dark eyebrow. "Why, thank you, Nesger. I could hardly have hoped to notice that fact without your able assistance."

Nesger shook his head as if to rid himself of tiresome thief-lords and their heavy sarcasm alike, sagged against the doorway, and clutched at it for support with hands that left bloody marks behind. The lips of the Master of Shadows thinned.

"Slaughter," Nesger told him bluntly. "The caravan torn apart and set afire. More wizards'nTve ever seen in m'life, all hurling spells . . . an' that wench torching them all, and their wagons too, with her spellnre." He shook his head. "I'd back her 'gainst an army, or Manshoon of the Zhents himself, or both together. 'Slike she's a god, blasting everything that stands against her!"

Without waiting for reply or dismissal he turned and

staggered out.
The Master of Shadows stared at the empty doorway where Nesger had been, interlacing his ringers and rubbing them back and forth together thoughtfully. It would probably be best to just forget about the whole affair, at least until Tornar's return.
If, that is, Tornar ever did return.
The Zhentilar eyed the dead wizard and the lone, helmless woman standing over him, shouted, and surged forward as one, firing their bowguns.
Voldovan cursed and vaulted up inside his wagon, struggling to get out sword and signal-horn at the same time —as small but deadly bolts thudded home in Sharantyr's flesh.
She groaned and reeled back, dropping her blade to claw at Lhaeo's bag with the hand that hadn't stopped three bolts because she'd thrown it up to shield her face.
They were going to sword her, and she wouldn't have time.
The ranger rolled frantically in under the wagon, and only one blade slashed fire across her ribs ere she got the bag open and found the right stone.
Ironguard again, but that meant one small bone knife against a handcount of large, angry, armored men. Wonderful.
In the wagon overhead she could hear the muffled sounds of Shandril weeping—probably with her face buried in her bedding.
That was just about what Sharantyr felt like doing, right now, as she rolled over on her wounded arm, grunted at the pain, and snatched out the bolts. Their iron heads passed through her flesh like smoke, but blood spurted from the holes they'd made. There was one more healing gem ...
The lantern light coming in under the wagon dimmed— and not just from all the men stabbing at her and cautiously squirming in under the wagon to reach her, either. This gloom was like a hungry shadow, gliding forward ...

"Shan!" the ranger cried. "Get away from here! There's something dark, that drinks magic!"

She heard a startled oath from Narm and a wild shriek of grief and fury that must be Shandril. It was followed by a louder oath from Voldovan in the instant before the wagon above her burst apart in spellflames that sent the Zhentilar scrambling back with curses of their own. The darkness swirled hungrily up from beneath the wagon, reaching for—

Roaring white fire that crisped the shouting Zhentilar and the grass they stood in alike, in a single, terrifying instant, ere stabbing down at the darkness.

"Sharantyr!" Shandril shouted, from somewhere above and behind it. "Get clear—you can, can't you?"

"Yes!" the ranger shouted back, rolling for all she was worth. The darkness was swirling like leaves circling in a storm whirlwind, feeding on the flame that sought to destroy it. She had to warn Shandril about that, so the lass could—could ... do what?

Dimly Sharantyr became aware, as she found her feet and, staggering, her balance, that the darkness was screaming. A shrill, high cry, words in an unfamiliar language that somehow reminded her of things she'd heard, down the years, then just pain again, shrieks that soared higher and higher.

There came a sudden coldness in Sharantyr's heart, and she looked down to see a swordtip emerging from under her breasts.

"Ye shouldn't have turned yer back on me," a voice whispered in her ear.

"And you," she snarled, as she whirled around and bruised her knuckles on Voldovan's nose and jaw in a solid punch that sent him flying, "shouldn't try to impersonate a caravan master who'd know better!"

She sank down, clutching herself with both hands against sudden, surging pain. Ironguards were great spells, but when a foe used an enchanted blade ...

"Sharantyr!" Shandril cried, leaping out of the wagon in a halo of snarling spellfire. "Are you hurt?"
"I—I'll live," the ranger managed to reply, going to her knees. "I think."
Arauntar was pounding toward them across the camp, sword in hand and an endless bellow calling guards to him as he came. Several had heeded and were following him, but reluctantly and at quite a distance.
Behind Shandril, however, was a sight that shook Sharantyr more than anything she'd ever seen before. The screaming darkness was man-shaped, now, and thrice as tall as the wagon. As she watched, it grew swiftly larger, looming like a shadowy giant. Shuddering and writhing, it grew ever darker and more solid. It was drinking the spellfire that Shandril had hurled!
"Shan!" the ranger screamed, pointing. "Behind you!" The maid of Highmoon turned, saw, and pointed both her hands at the shadow-thing like a wizard gleefully hurling his first lighting bolt.
As Shandril poured spellfire into the looming giant in an eye-searing white storm that shook the very air it tore through, Sharantyr saw that the young woman's teeth were clenched, and her face was as white as bone. Fine fury, yes, but how could the lass prevail against something that could feed on spellfire?
Pain crashed over the ranger in a fresh wave, and she lost all sight of false Voldovans, running guards, shadow-giants and spellfire-hurling Shandrils alike in a shuddering collapse onto her face and side, writhing on the trampled grass. What magic had been on that blade?
The ground was shaking so violently now that the ranger started to tumble from side to side, ending up on her back—in time to see the night sky split apart with spellfire.
Flames were arcing all over the camp as Shandril lashed out.
"Die!" she spat. "All of you! Die and leave us all be! Touch not Sharantryr and Arauntar and my Narm! Leave us alone!"

Laeral gasped and swayed. An anxious apprentice dared much to reach out and touch her—then held the Lady Mage of Waterdeep, cradling her awkwardly as if she might shatter or burst in a fury of rending spells. Other apprentices in that chamber of Blackstaff Tower saw and fell silent, staring in awe.

"Lady," the daring apprentice asked, "are you—well?"

"Back," Laeral said urgently. "Maratchyn, leave go, for your own safety!"

The youth did so, to stare at her anxiously from a few paces away. Laeral waved at him. "Get all enchanted things out of this chamber," she gasped. "Go!"

Apprentices stared an instant longer, then hastened to do her bidding . . . save Maratchyn. He stood by, hands raised to—he knew not what. Catch her if she fell?

He saw Laeral steady herself, clench her fists as if to fight down pain or nausea, and straighten. "Yes," she whispered, nodding to empty air. "Yes, sister, I feel it too."

The apprentice's stare widened as a ghostly face started to form in the air facing Laeral. He'd seen Alustriel, High Lady of Silverymoon, a time or two before and knew very well who he was looking at. She gave Maratchyn a wink of recognition as she grew more solid. He swallowed. She knew him? Oh, gods .. .

"Her spellfire must be out of control," Alustriel said simply. "This could be the end."

Laeral nodded. "We must be there. Can you—?"

Alustriel smiled thinly. "If this continues, a Weave-field between us will serve to scoop enough of this wild, spilling-in-all-directions energy to strengthen me fully and take us all to Shandril."

"All?"

"Bring Mirt and Asper, as well as the both of us—but leave yon handsome apprentice behind. I've a feeling we'll have enough innocent victims to try to protect against raging spellfire as 'tis."

Laeral gave the overbold Maratchyn a warning look as she replied, "I can feel one such right from here, now. Mother Mystra, but her spellfire's strong!"
"You feel one who needs protection? Who?" "Sharantyr of Shadowdale—sorely wounded, too." Alustriel nodded. Her ghostly face tightened, gasped at the ceiling, and then said, "Ahh, better. Almost whole. Sister, farspeak Mirt and Asper. 'Tis less than kind to snatch folk half across Faerun without warning, and we want them properly clad and armed."
Laeral's lips twisted in a wry smile. "If there is such a thing as 'properly clad and armed' for attending a battlefield where spellfire's running wild."
"You could wear Khelben," Alustriel suggested lightly, her words only half-teasing.
The Lady Mage of Waterdeep smiled and shook her head. "He's needed more here keeping Waterdeep in order—and I'd not want to place him among so many foes of Art. Not for his protection, but for theirs. He's all too apt to smite first and show mercy later."
Alustriel nodded. "lean feel Sharantyr now. She's in bad shape. We'd best not wait longer to translocate her, but we need an anchor point that won't land her among foes."
"If it's only to be for a short time," Laeral replied, "we can just send her back to where she last relieved herself, on the trail. She walked, remember?"
"Haste matters most," Alustriel agreed, and her phantom face seemed to blaze more brightly.
Maratchyn watched in silent awe. The two Chosen of Mystra must be snaring raging spellfire energies and using
them to teleport this distant Sharantyr person from wherever she was to an unknown anchor point—waste or discarded hair or the like that had once been part of her own body.
He shivered at the very thought. "Dangerous" was too mild a word. Why, th—
"Done," Alustriel said calmly. "She lives. Are Mirt and Asper

ready?"
"Moreso than 111 ever be, I think," Laeral replied and turned to give Maratchyn a jaunty wave.
Her hand was still moving in that wry gesture when she vanished. Alustriel's ghost-face winked out in the same instant, leaving the apprentice blinking at where they'd been.
Maratchyn was still' drawing breath and trying to remember every last nuance of tone and look exchanged by his Lady Teacher and the High Lady when there was a sudden crackling of the air behind him, a presence that made him turn quickly.
The Lord Mage of Waterdeep was standing in the nearest doorway, in his customary black robes and with no less than three scepters of power clutched in one of his hands. The other held a quill pen from which a single drop of ink dripped—iridescent green-gold ink, Maratchyn couldn't help but notice, as it splattered in all directions.
The Blackstaff did not appear to be in the best of moods. He fixed the lone apprentice with a very direct stare, and said, "I feel very great disturbances in the Weave, and Art surges through this chamber far more strongly than my wards should allow. Master Maratchyn, have you any explanation for this? Should I be wary of your great powers of mischief or despairing of your clumsiness ... or merely demanding the utmost of your no doubt finely honed powers of observation?"
Maratchyn swallowed. "I—ah—the Lady Alustriel, Lord Khelben. She appeared, conferred with the Lady Mage
Laeral, and—well, they departed together. She said there was no need to involve you."
Khelben's eyes narrowed. "So glib, Master Maratchyn? I fear I'm going to have to visit your memories directly and see and hear just as you did. You may well be telling the truth, but you must admit that it sounds a mite ... farfetched."
"No disagreement there, Lord!" Maratchyn replied , heartily

and meant it.
Spellfire blinded Sharantyr and turned blue—a rushing blue fury that flashed through her, spun her head-over-heels, and whirled her up into its flood. The ranger felt herself plucked up from the grass nigh Shandril, and hurled somewhere far, far away. Somewhere that had something to do with a bloody lock of her own hair ..,
Suddenly she was elsewhere—an elsewhere that had moonlight and many tree branches, but entirely lacked spell-fire, lanterns, wagons, running men, or spell-hurling wizards.
What it did have was warm, yielding, gently snoring bodies—or at least one. Sharantyr landed hard atop it, and was aware of a male, human, rather unwashed smell as she sank deep into its source with a crash of snapping branches and sliding boots.
The incoherent oaths of a man jolted awake in startled pain accompanied them both to the ground, as they fell out of the tree together.
Sharantyr landed hard on a particularly unyielding surface of the scenic Blackrocks, and lay there twisting and gasping in helpless agony, her breath driven out of her and what felt like roiling fire in its place.
The man was more fortunate. Tornar the Eye had been sleeping in a tree somewhere in the Blackrocks for safety against marauding beasts—not an altogether successful tactic, it seemed. He did, however, land with one knee atop whatever had pounced on him, and bounced back and away from it, to land on his feet in an angry crouch, blade hissing out.
The moonlight clearly showed him the ranger Sharantyr writhing on the rocks, her face contorted in pain. He stared down at her and slapped at his pouch with an oath. Thin wisps of smoke were rising from it, and when he slapped at it frantically, backed swiftly away from the pain-wracked woman on the rocks, and tore it open, out fell a flaming,

sizzling tangle of—hair?
Her hair. Some sort of magic, obviously. He shook it all out, dug fingers in where it had been, and rubbed to make sure no smoldering was left. Frowning, he shook his head and turned back to Sharantyr.
She'd made no move to draw a weapon or do anything more than curl up like a child, clutching her gut and trembling in what seemed to be utter agony. Yet she bled not, nor seemed cut. He frowned down at her, then sheathed his blade, knelt, and put out a cautious hand to where her own agonized hands were clutching.
Sharantyr shuddered, sobbed, and tried to twist away from him, kicking at the rocks beneath her. Tornar winced. He'd seen a man do that, once, while dying with his guts torn out by the horns of an enraged bull. She must be hurt badly ...
"Lie still," he hissed, putting a hand on one trembling shoulder. "Easy, there!"
Sharantyr moaned beneath him, a despairing bleat of hopeless pain, and he dug hastily in another of his belt-pouches, seeking one of his most precious items of booty: a steel vial that never left him.
Her teeth were clenched, but with brutal strength he forced fingers into the corners of her jaws and got them apart enough to pour the contents of the vial between. Then he clapped a hand over her mouth and held her jaws together during the brief frenzy of convulsions that followed.
When she lay unmoving under him and her breath seemed to be coming in deep, regular gasps, Tornar let go and hastily drew back.
Only Sharantyr's eyes moved to follow him. They regarded each other for a moment in the moonlight before her lips moved.
"Thank you for healing me, Tornar," she told him. "I-I know not how I came here. Was it by your hand? Are you taking me back to the Master of Shadows?"
"I was ordered to slay you," he replied slowly, "but I'll not do

it—or go back to Scornubel. I've no idea how you came to fall out of the sky onto me . . . but Lady, I do know one thing: I've never seen your like before or ever thought to." He hesitated, and then asked, "Could you learn to trust me?"
"I could," Sharantyr replied, her eyes on his. "Why do you ask this?"
"I—I'd like to part with you as a friend," he told her, eyes steady on hers.
She reached out one weak arm and squeezed his hand. "I think we can manage that."
Her reaching was the last insult to her much-slashed leathers, and they fell away from her shoulder and bodice.
Wordlessly Tornar plucked up her ruined garments and held the scraps back up in position. "The night's cold," he said simply.
She looked at him, smiled, and then glanced up at the tree. "Is there room on your branch for two?"
The man from Scornubel made a horrible wheezing sound, then, and doubled over. It was three anxious breaths later, when the crawling lady ranger of Shadowdale reached his side to see what was wrong, that she realized Tornar the Eye was laughing.

HARPING THROUGH SPELLFIRE

How many dying men and maids have heard harping, haunting yet soothing, lacing on as their life and hearing fade, telling them that beauty endures, that life goes on, that they'll not be forgotten? Not enough. Never enough. Wherefore get up and draw sword, strike harp, and play! Play, before the gods take us all!
The character Brokenhehn the Harper
in Aukh Rammantle's play The Leaping Fish
Year of the Thirsty Sword (first performance)

Campfires flared up in hungry threads of flame to join the leaping, everchanging web of spellfire above them. Its roar was almost deafening, and it stabbed out with arc after arc of fire that made wagons explode in fury at a touch.

"Gods above!" Mirt said, his merchant's soul shocked at the waste all around him, trade-goods and the wagons that held
Asper nodded her head, seeming almost dazed by the sheer outpouring of howling force. It was like facing an angrily erupting volcano. Mirt shook his head to banish that brief, long-ago memory, set his teeth, and dragged his slender lady away from where the air itself was crackling and complaining.
Behind them, the bright figure hurled more spellfire, and in answer the High Lady's silver fire flared up into a shield. Spellfire and silver fire wrestled, and rushing streams of spellflame melted apart into a wild webwork of many holes—but still roared with frightening speed, streaming over the silver fire as a river rushes over rocks, and hurled Alustriel back.
Mirt had one glimpse of the High Lady's grim face before she sank down into a raging whorl of flames, and could be seen no more at the heart of their snarling, behind fires that reared up castle-high in their bright battling.
He became aware of a sudden sharp pain in his ear, and shook his head, bewildered. Asper had twisted in his arms to bite him, and he dimly became aware that she'd been shouting at him for some time, trying to gain his attention.
"Aye, what?" he roared, and she pointed with her blade.
"Look!"
Mirt looked, and saw a man behind Shandril—a slender, darkly handsome man with a wand in his hand. He'd just fired it, seen its magic race at Shandril's back and be swept toward the stars by billowing spellfire, shaken his head in disgust, and crouched low to crawl closer.
Mirt cast a glance at the maid from Highmoon. She was out of control, to be sure, but even if taking her down became needful, a wand-blast that might send miles of Faerun skyward wasn't the way to do it.
"I'll take him, leaving yon merry blades in yer hands," he growled in Asper's ear, and pointed to the handful of

warriors struggling against the flames on Shandril's other side. She clapped him on the arm, whirled to give him a fierce, hot kiss, and then raced away.

Mirt watched her go with a smile—gods, what a beauty! What spirit! Gods keep her safe!—then turned and began his own sprint around the flames, toward the man with the wand.

He'd hoped to cut in close around the lass. The night was growing darker, so her flames must be fading a bit . . . yet they seemed to be raging as furiously as ever. Off to one side the silver fire that hid Alustriel from view flared up, but it, too, seemed dimmer.

Mirt glanced up as his boots skidded on something wet, and saw that the stars were blotted out. The dark thing, whatever it was, loomed over most of the camp, now, and seemed—by Mirt's familiar feeling of being under scrutiny—to be watching events below.

He shook his head and ran on. The gods certainly seemed to enjoy piling one misfortune atop another, enthusiastically providing three perils where one would do, and curse all the men-twisting bunch of them if that dog with the wand wasn't standing up behind Shandril to try sending death again!

The Old Wolf put his head down and ran, cutting in closer to Shandril than he'd yet dared, dodging hungry tongues of spellfire to get to this newest peril, and knowing he hadn't a blessed hope of reaching the man in time.

Yet Shandril was no fool. The curtain of spellfire cloaking her back was thicker than it raged anywhere else, and twice the man with the wand had to duck down as spellflames suddenly spat at him. The second time he ended up on his chin on the scorched turf, flattened out as low as he could, while an arm of silver fire wrestled with spellfire uncomfortably close above his head.

Mirt tried not to think about the fact that he was hurling himself at that particular snarling conflagration much too

swiftly to stop or even veer with any hopes of putting himself where he wanted to be—out of the way of a swiftly raised blade, for instance.

He ducked back out of the way of flame, his racing feet skidding out from under him, and all time for thinking was past.

He crashed down hard on his back and bounced, slithering on, and saw the wand-wielder give him a startled look and rise again, as a drift of silver fire swept spellfire away like a hand clawing aside a tapestry, leaving the way to Shandril's back momentarily clear.

Marlel grinned savagely as he triggered his wand, and then swiftly ducked down again in case the wench should explode.

His magic sped as swift as any arrow, straight at the maid's unprotected back. Nothing could stop it now! He was going to be the one who laid low this Sh—

The great gasping walrus of a man who'd come running out of nowhere flung himself up into the air with a roar that made Shandril whirl around. The wand-bolt struck him squarely in the chest.

Mirt was flung away as an angry child throws a rag doll, and the last, fading traces of wand-fire reached Shandril.

She shuddered, spellfire already racing up and down in her limbs in a fresh halo, and the Dark Blade of Doom heard her cry out in pain.

His grin widened as he fired again, and he was still grinning when spellfire sped back along the path of his bolt, snatching up and reversing the racing wand-fire to stab back and make all Faerun a single blinding-bright roar.

Asper saw something small and black tumble past her. From out of its whirling teeth gleamed at her, set in a broad grin, and then the blackened, blazing head was gone into the smoke and wandering flames of the many spreading grassfires.

She whirled from the business of dealing death to Zhentilar

and launched herself into a run. Mirt had been trying to reach that man ...

Spellfire reached for her, but silver fire lashed out again from the blazing ball of warring flame on the far side of Shandril, and the maid of Highmoon turned her attention back to it.

Asper saw Narm Tamaraith rise from his knees, recognize her, and begin to weave a spell. It did not seem a hostile magic, somehow, and she flung herself to the ground, rolled under the lone tongue of spellfire, and found her feet again to race on.

She almost tripped over Mirt, a few hard-running moments later, and screamed.

Spellfire snarled at her almost instantly but was turned aside, and as Asper looked up wildly, Narm gave her a grin and a wave. His magic was settling over her like a bright net, torn and plucked at by spellfire but keeping its full fury away from where Asper frantically fumbled at her belt and scabbard for the vials that held her healing potions.

The Old Wolf groaned, and smoke poured from his mouth. Asper bit her lip, snatched the seal off one vial, and practically threw its contents down his throat.

Mirt erupted into a storm of coughing, wheezing, and snorting beneath her, and she rode him like a lover, grinding herself against him to keep him down low to the ground as a fresh storm of silver fire, then spellfire swept Narm's spell away to claw at each other just above Asper's head.

"Easy, Old Wolf," she soothed him, tugging a second cork out of a vial with her teeth. "Easy, love. Here, drink this."

She rolled off him to give him a chance to breathe and swallow, then held the potion to his lips when his trembling hand could not. She didn't want to look at the ravaged ruin of his chest or wonder if all the healing magics she carried would be enough. Instead she risked a glance through the storms of streaming, whirling flame to where Narm stood, to wave him thanks.

He was casting another spell now, and as Asper watched she

saw the caravan master Voldovan run up behind him, sword in hand, and stab Narm viciously, his second thrust running right through the young wizard's chest.

"Shan!" Narm screamed, staggering forward. "Sha—" His second cry ended in a gurgling of blood, and he lurched forward, clutching at his throat, as Voldovan ducked away and disappeared into the drifting smoke.

Shandril whirled around and stared at her man. Then she howled, "Noooo!" in a voice that must have deafened folk abed back in Triel, and hurled a river of bright fire at Narm.

It was a brighter sustained torrent than Asper had ever seen before—just looking at it made her eyes stream—and somehow different, shot through with spiraling bright motes that seemed larger and softer than sparks. It enfolded Narm and drove him fully upright, arms flung wide, and seemed to surge through him, pouring forth from mouth and nostrils ... even from his eyes, as a storm of bright sparks.

Narm screamed again, a high, wordless cry of agony, and collapsed, falling over stiffly like a tree toppling into flames.

"Narm!" Shandril howled, "NARM! Answer me!"

The maid of spellfire crouched in her inferno, her face wet with tears, staring in despair at where the man she loved had stood. There came no reply from him, nothing but the roaring of flames. Her healing had served her beloved just as it had Beldimarn

"No!" Shandril screamed at the skies. "No! Everyone DEAD! Death, death, all I do is slay!" Her voice mounted into a great

shriek of grief and rage, and her body erupted in spellfire.

If Asper had thought the camp a place of blinding-bright flame before, she knew better now. She had to turn her head away, eyes shut tight, against the now-screaming brilliance, and shuddered atop Mirt, whimpering, as the ground beneath them flared into uncomfortable heat and slumped slightly. Closer to Shandril it must be melting and flowing, sinking into a pit... a pit that would claim them both if she

didn't drag her Old Wolf to safe ground.
Evaereol Rathrane had never known power like this before. He was as large as a dozen dragons, a great glowing dark cloud with power enough now to solidify at will or even to make this gigantic form striding, earth-shaking reality. He dared not do so, just yet, as spellfire and something even stronger—these silver flames he'd never seen the like of before—raged below him. Soon, though, all this greatly changed world would tremble and bow down before Evaereol Rathrane, archwizard of archmages, mightiest of all weavers of Art! Smiling inside, the darkness that was Rathrane looked south and west, where a fell and cold awareness had awakened to his presence and now regarded him.
Larloch, he named that foe, and laughed at it, mind-to-mind, knowing he could sweep away the lich at will . . . and knowing the distant lord of liches knew it, too.
Yes, he was now greater than the mightiest of Netheril had ever been, a colossus of flowing magic—and still the spellfire flowed into him from below, and he grew mightier. The little female who was its source was capering and wailing now, gone from rage to grief, but her pull on the Weave was as strong as ever, and the power—the power!
Ah, still it flowed, bright and searing, painful now as it flooded on into him. Endless, fiery, delicious . . . Rathrane exulted, throwing up hands to the stars as if he could reach them, towering ever higher. He was shuddering helplessly in the grip of pain, now, as the spellfire flowed on, but he'd master it as he'd mastered it before.
His shoulders rose again, and he was tall enough to see small winking wisps of silver fire in a distant crater in the wilderlands rock that had not been there before, wherein a spreadeagled and broken Lady Mage of Waterdeep lay staring up at the same stars he stood among.
He could reach out and pluck her life as easily as a thought... but drew back, even as the thought quickened in him, out of mistrust of that silver fire. There was something"

too fey about it, too .. . strong.
Bah! What could be stronger than he? Well, this pain, for one thing . . .
As he convulsed and moaned and collapsed in earnest, Rathrane began to realize for the first time that the endless flow of spellfire was going to rend and overwhelm him, extinguishing all that was Evaereol Rathrane—and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, he could do to stop it. He tried to tear himself away from the great colossus, becoming a small and flying thing of shadows once more, but—
but—
He could no longer gather all that was Rathrane together, even if he let all this newfound power slip away and became naught but a ghostly sentience once more ... even less than he had been, for all that long, dark time ...
He was going to die at last, he was going to be lost, drowned and torn apart in this sea of endless, gnawing power. He was—doomed. He was . . . going ... at last . . .
The darkness above her was alive. Riding her grief and lost in it, Shandril barely cared as the awareness overhanging her faltered and then failed, and thoughts that were not her own invaded her.
They came in a whispering flood as the great wraith-cloud dwindled and died and ... faded away. Caring little, Shandril let them rush over her and into her, imparting their secrets like storm-blown leaves slapping her weary face.
Rathrane, the gloating ghost had been, a wizard of Netheril —of course; were not all these awakened ancient evils from that fell time and realm above realms, where wizards had thought themselves kings? This Rathrane had drunk magic as some carters gulped ale, and grown strong, and in his towering, this last little while, had touched many minds ...
Shandril shivered at some of those thoughts, even as she realized dimly that her striving had worked—once spellfire had slipped from her control and raged unchecked, the magic-draining phantom was doomed.

Narm, none of this will bring back my Narm, she whispered bitterly into the darkness, as thoughts opened up like night-blooming flowers around her, catching her unwilling interest as if they had hooks, and showing her ...

. . . Orthil Voldovan had been slain in Triel, and his likeness and place taken by the Red Wizard Thavaun ...

. . . Alustriel of Silverymoon and Laeral of Waterdeep had ridden her spellfire here, bringing her friends Mirt and Asper to her aid—and now she'd harmed them all...

. . . Sharantyr had been hurled away, wounded, by magic, somewhere into the night...

. . . the man staggering up to his feet in front of her, tossing down the empty vial that had held the third healing potion he'd poured down his throat in swift succession, was a worm of a wizard. "Hlael of the Zhentarim," she named him aloud. A man ruled by terror, who'd been ordered to seize spellfire by the mage Drauthtar and sent here into this battle by a fell, much-feared Zhent, the wizard Hesperdan.

Narm is gone, she hissed into his mind, as Hlael became aware of her regard and stiffened in alarm, and you shall pay for it! You'll all pay for it!

Shandril reached down into herself so deep that it hurt her sorely, dug her fingers like claws into all the spellfire she could handle, sobbed with the pain of that heaving, and hurled it at Hlael Tor aunt.

The Zhentarim managed to open his mouth to scream before his mind and then his body burst apart, but Shandril scarcely noticed his dying. She rode her bright and deadly flood on into the darkness, leaping along a scrying-linkage to another cold-hearted wizard—the one who'd been watching Hlael from afar.

"Drauthtar," she snarled as she reached him, "die!"

Spellfire roared and swirled, and the lass who was its source and its rider turned away without another glance, seeking the next Zhentarim to slay, gathering her energies to seek Hesperdan.

Power in plenty, but no spells to seek a man hidden. Shandril screamed in rage when the energies roiling around her served her not, and hurled herself like a lightning bolt back across miles of wolf-haunted night to where Alustriel of Silverymoon was emerging from a self-spun fortress of silver fire to seek her stricken Sister, Laeral.

"Child," Alustriel told her gravely, as their gazes met, "let fall your flames, and know comfort." r

There was no trace of fear in the High Lady's voice, but Shandril heard pity and let it spur her on to greater rage.

"Show me Hesperdan!" she screamed, shaking.

Spellfire and silver fire snarled and clawed each other once more, but Alustriel nodded through their striving and with the barest trace of a smile replied, "I can do that."

Silver fire swirled into a tunnel. Shandril looked down it and then flung herself at the distant figure she saw there, riding her flame a long, dark way.

Halfway to that distant robed man, he became aware of her. Glittering dark eyes widened, hands wove frantic spells, and the tunnel she raced down began to come apart.

"No!" Shandril screamed through fresh tears, hurling spellfire in frantic haste. "Mystra, let him not escape me! Lady of Magic, hear me!"

Her cry seemed to roll out across vast distances, echoing and booming, but the figure ahead was fading into darkness. As her spellfire leaped after it, she could not see where the flames went.

Everything was dissolving into darkness and tears, the stink of smoke and burned flesh growing stronger around her.

Flames burst forth out of empty air where no flame should have been able to kindle, and men drew back in murmured alarm to leave the gleaming black tiles before the high seat of Manshoon bare.

A line of black flames outlined by angry red fire descended to the floor—and vomited forth a blackened man in robes, his hair afire.

"Spellfire," Drauthtar gasped, shuddering in the aftermath of his desperate teleport, "destroys all! Seek it not!"

Many priests and mages gaped at him as he staggered a few paces across the floor of the Zhentarim stronghold, leaving footprints of flame in his wake.

By the time he turned to face Dread Lord Manshoon— who'd risen hastily from his throne, rings winking into life— Drauthtar was little more than a husk filled with raging flame. As his face twisted into a smile and he opened his mouth to deliver a dying curse on the leader of the Zhentarim, he toppled forward.

His last magic unworked, Drauthtar Inskirl collapsed into swirling, spitting flames that scorched out to almost lick the boots of Lord Manshoon.

The leader of the Zhentarim stared down at the dying flames until they were gone into drifting smoke, and then turned without a word and walked away.

A young mageling named Imvoran shivered, then was violently ill all over the gleaming black tiles in front of him. He'd heard of spellfire and seen many a mage die by magic, too—but it was the first time in his dozen years of service to the Brotherhood that he'd ever seen fear on the face of Dread Lord Manshoon.

The old man ascended the lightless shaft like a racing wind, hurling aside shield-spells and helmed horrors alike, and sprang into the midst of the startled gargoyles before the mage with serpent-fingers and floating eyeballs could do more than snatch up a long, dark-spired scepter with a heartfelt curse.

"Hesperdan, you—" the Maimed Wizard began, but whatever colorful description Eirhaun had intended to snarl was lost in the flash and roar of spellfire leaping up the shaft, tumbling helmed horrors into smoke and shards, and stabbing into the shadows.

A blue-white web of force suddenly glowed around Hesperdan, and the spellfire that clawed at it rebounded

across the room at the wizard with the scepter.
His shielding was a thing of mingled crimson and emerald fire, and it wrestled desperately with the spellfire. The scepter smoked and burst apart, followed into oblivion by two rings that took Eirhaun's hissing snake-fingers with them. Spellfire scorched and sizzled about the walls, shattering pillars and gargoyles alike, then faded and fell back down the shaft.
The two wizards looked at each other—Hesperdan's cold and dark smile meeting the glare of the Maimed Wizard. The older wizard had deflected the spellfire that sought his life at Eirhaun Sooundaeril, who'd in turn thrust it aside into the walls of his stronghold. That massive peak of stone was old and huge and girt with many spells, but there was no one and nothing it could deflect spellfire into.
Wherefore cracks had already appeared in the walls and the vaulted ceiling, and the floor beneath the two men was shuddering and starting to move. Explosions rumbled far below, and ravaged stone screamed like a man in anguish. A chasm opened in the rippling floor between the two wizards.
Stone fell away with a rush and a roar. Hesperdan and Eirhaun the Maimed stared at each other across the gulf as rooms fell away beneath them, one after another, crashing down into the dust and screams below.
"Oh, dear," Hesperdan remarked mildly. "I do believe your stronghold is collapsing."
The Maimed gathered the spell around him that would whisk him away and replied menacingly, "We will meet again, Old Man."
Hesperdan smiled again. "Indeed. I'm counting on it."
He vanished an instant after his longtime foe—but just before the shattered floor he'd been standing on cracked and fell away with a roar.
Shandril went to her knees as she wept, spellfire raining down with her tears. More spellflames raced along her arms to roll away into the night. "Oh,.Mystra, aid me!" she cried.

"Shan?" a voice as grief-ridden as her own asked her, from very close by. "Is there anything I can do?"
Asper was also on her knees, facing Shan across smoking ash from about an armslength away. Shandril stared at her in horror.
"Get away!" she snarled. "Go from here before I burn you, too!"
"No," Asper told her, her face white with fear but her voice firm. "My Mirt lies wounded behind me. I'll not leave him. I'm his only shield against—oh, Shan—against spellfire!"
Shandril burst into fresh tears, shook her head, got up, and fled blindly into the night.
Men cowering amid the smoke watched her go, a stumbling, sobbing figure wreathed in flames, who left blazing footprints behind her.
She stopped atop a bare knob of rock on the edge of camp, and there turned, tears glimmering in her eyes and splashing in flames to the rocks below. On a curl of spellfire like dragons' breath her voice rolled softly back to Asper: "Farewell!"
Asper stood up and reached out to her. "Shan, no!"
"No?" Shandril cried wildly. "I've killed Narm! My man is gone, dead by my hand! Dead by this cursed spellfire that feels so good!" She shook her head, flames swirling in her hair, and sobbed bitterly. "Beldimarr too, and the Lady Laeral, and dozens more! I slaughtered them all! Everywhere I go, people die—and still wizards keep trying to get their hands on this fire inside me! One day they might succeed in taking it—and what then? Shandril Shessair causes the rest of Faerun be swept away?"
"Shandril, 'tis not your fault!" Asper cried, taking a few reluctant steps closer.
"Nay? I say it is," Shandril howled, her eyes two flames. "And I am done with slaying, done with fear and running and fighting, done with it all!"
She threw back her head and told the stars, "Gorstag,

forgive me .. . Mystra, take me!"
Drawing in a deep breath, she gave Asper a little wave and a half-smile, and went to one knee. Propping both elbows on her raised knee, she put her fingers in her mouth—and fed herself spellfire.
There was a. moment of silence, then a trembling—a shuddering of earth and air and blood pounding in the ears that began as a sound so low it shook bones rather than being heard, but built swiftly to a din greater than any dragon might make.
No one could stand or wage war or be heard in that trembling tumult. All over that bloody field men fell, tumbling helplessly, and lightning snarled out from the lone lass on the rock, playing like restless blue snakes from blade to shield and back again, until men threw away their swords or tore off their armor, to lie wincing, cowering, and wondering when they would die. Asper fell, tried to get up again, and found herself once more on the ground, one shoulder to the scorched earth. She kept her eyes on Shandril all the while, and it was as she was rolling over onto her stomach again that she saw the maid from Highmoon rise up into the air, trembling in the thrall of the furious white stream of spellfire leaking from her mouth to roil around her as she went on feeding it to herself.
Perhaps forty feet off the ground her hands fell away from her mouth as she stared at the empty air beside her and gasped in wonder, "Narm? M-Mystra? Gorstag?"
And then Shandril exploded, in a burst of radiance so bright that Asper saw nothing for days afterward.
"Oh, lass," the High Lady murmured. "You saved him and healed him, and never knew. He but collapsed from the pain and lives yet. Unlike you."
The Weave flashed and shook itself, as if rid of a great burden. Alustriel Silverhand, weeping with grief and pain amid leaping tongues of silver fire, let go her shielding spells at last.

In Shadowdale, Elminster looked up sharply from an old map as Mourngrym frowned across the table at him and Illistyl and Jhessail winced in unison and grabbed for the backs of chairs, for support. "She's gone," the Old Mage said slowly, shaking his head. "She lasted longer than I'd ever thought she would."

Torm's eyes narrowed. "Who?"

"Shandril," Rathan said heavily, and reached for a decanter. "Gathered, as the gods gather us all."

"Mystra preserve her," Jhessail gasped, and threw back her head as if starving for air. A single tear fell like a wet star on the map before her. Torm reached out a finger and drew a prayer-rune with it, right across the face of Elminster's map.

Mourngrym waited for the Old Mage to erupt, but no storm came. Elminster merely shook his head again, looking off into a distant otherwhere that only he could see, and murmured, "Mystra will provide."

"Sharantyr?" Florin asked quietly, from his end of the table.

The Old Mage almost smiled. "Someone else has already provided for her. Someone who could teach Torm, here, a thing or two."

"What's wrong, Tess?" the Purple Dragon asked, coming awake in an instant and reaching for her with one hand and his ready sword with the other.

Tessaril Winter trembled under his touch like a little girl, and he swiftly wrapped a comforting arm around her smooth curves. "I know not, King Azoun," she said formally, her voice empty and despairing. "I only know someone has died —and in dying, reached out to me."

"Who?" the king of Cormyr asked softly, enfolding her in his arms.

Tessaril whispered, "She. Young, and of great power ... it can only be Shandril Shessair. She never made it to Silvery-moon, after all." She swallowed. "Oh, Az—hold me."

"I will," Azoun said gently, not bothering to point out that he already was. Kindness is a rare quality in a king,

understanding another, and caring a third. Tessaril lay still and thought on all three, and her eyes filled with tears.
"At least I have you," she whispered, and the Purple Dragon's answer was a simple whisper.
"Yes."
They lay together in silence for a long time before his Lady Lord of Eveningstar twisted free of the royal grasp and of her bed in one smooth movement, to stand bare and magnificent in the moonlight.
"Where—?" Azoun asked, hefting his sword.
Tessaril turned from a jewel-box on her dressing table with a pendant in her hand. As she held it out, the great jewel seemed to glow slightly. "I must tell Fee without delay,"
she explained almost apologetically. "She'll have felt my—my upset, and be lying awake now, wondering."
"Filfaeril? Are your two minds often linked, when you and I are together?"
Tessaril smiled a little sadly at him. "I would consider it treason on my part if they were not," she said quietly. "We also talk often with this."
She heard his sigh as she bent over the jewel, and turned her head again to add, with a thin half-smile, "And yes: often about you."
Azoun lay back with another sigh and told the moonlit ceiling, "I might have known."
Lord Manshoon stopped in midstride, the whirling magic that had brought him to this chamber in Zhentil Keep still dwindling behind him, and snapped, "Send for the priests! Something has happened—something that has made the Weave itself tremble!"
As wizards scrambled to do his bidding, he murmured, "So if the wench is dead, who has spellfire now?"
In the Stonelands a cool breeze was quickening, but despite the leaves it rustled and the branches it bent, a swirl of ashes rose and stood against it in the air, whirling up briefly into a shape that might have been an armored dwarf.

The shape turned, peering northwest over the puddled flow of stone that had once been a spire called Irondrake Rock as if straining to see something. No one was there to see the ashen phantom, and after a time it collapsed with a sigh and was gone again.

Peace returned to Delg's Dell, though the breeze blew no more that night.

Oprion Blackstone looked out of a high window in a certain tower of Zhentil Keep and murmured, "Another scheme fallen to ashes. Manshoon will send his spell-dogs to summon us to parley. What would happen, I wonder, if, I simply refused to come?"

"We'd slay you, of course," a deep, wet voice said from the air outside a moment before its owner drifted into view from around the tower's curve. "Many humans are that stupid, of course, but I was hoping we'd weeded out the worst dolts already."

A second beholder shuddered as it drifted after the first. "One human she," it said, "and so much slaughter of our kind. It will be long before I rid myself of that memory."

The priest carefully made no comment about seeing the cobbles below awash in beholder blood. He was in no hurry to follow Shandril Shessair into the waiting arms of the gods.

A scrying-spell collapsed back into the surrounding shadows, and a slender hand put down a goblet. "Well, that was spectacular," its owner said calmly. "Perhaps the younglings will return from their misadventures, now that their prize is gone."

"I think not," another voice replied. "Once freedom is tasted . . ."

Into that place of shadows burst the sudden light of a spell, bringing back those very tasters of freedom far more swiftly than even the most optimistic elder had hoped.

"By the blood of Malaug in us!" one newly returned Malaugrym burst out excitedly, tendrils snaking out toward a handy decanter. "Did you see?"

"We did," the owner of the goblet replied politely.
"Indeed," the second elder agreed, holding up another goblet in a hand that shook more than slightly. ' •
The Red Wizard Thavaun let his spell-guise fall away. Caravan Master Orthil Voldovan would be needed no more.
Surveying the smoking ruin of the camp, he drew in a deep breath and hissed, "So much for spellfire. Well, at least I'm still alive."
"Not for more than a breath longer!" came a growl of doom from right behind him.
Arauntar took the wizard by the neck even before Thavaun could stiffen. He closed the fingers of one hairy hand firmly around a Thayan windpipe, batting the mage's frantically darting hands away from belt and pouches with the other.
Throttling Thavaun slowly, the Harper snarled, "For Orthil Voldovan! For Beldimarr! And—and for Shandril Shessair, damn you and all spell-snakes! I loved that lass! She was worth a hundred Red Wizards, a thousand Thays! She could have ruled all wizards and set the Realms to rights!"
He paused in mid-bellow and panted, looking around at the crawling caravan-men, who stared back at him with wide, frightened eyes. Arauntar flung down the dead, boneless body and added softly, "Or become the worst tyrant Faerun has ever known."
He sighed, turned to look at the burning wagons, then shook his head. Turning, he walked alone into the night.
"Like so many other things," he told the stars, "we'll never know, now. Another dream snuffed out... and I harp to keep those dreams alight. Fare you well, Shandril Shessair. Rest easy, Bel. Arauntar needs some time alone, now."
From where she lay unregarded in the darkness, Alustriel Silverhand lifted her head and through bleeding eyes watched the gruff Harper stalk away. It took her some time to gather strength enough to reach out across Faerun and say simply, "Sister, I need you."
She called on the Weave, and out of a twinkling of tiny stars

stepped a buxom figure in dark leathers.
Storm Silverhand bent over the High Lady of Silverymoon and murmured, "Mystra defend you, Endue. Who did th—oh. Oh, Bright Lady of us all. Shandril. She's .. ."
"Gone. Gathered to Mystra," Alustriel said wearily and pointed past Storm's knee as the bard knelt to hold her. "Someone else needs you, Sister," she added, almost fiercely. "Someone you can help more than anyone else in Faerun. A Harper in need of someone to walk with him for a time."
Storm turned and looked along Alustriel's pointing arm, to where the dwindling form of Arauntar was striding along in the moonlight.
"My thanks," she murmured, squeezing the High Lady's shoulder, and rose to follow the man walking alone into the night.
As she went, she cast a spell with a few swift, sure gestures, and tiny star-motes were born out of the darkness around her, shaping themselves into a harp in her hands. Its high, clear notes rose in her wake and went before her. Alustriel saw the Harper slow, then turn to see the source of the music.
He stopped and waited as the tall woman in leathers came striding toward him. Together, walking hip to hip like old friends, they went slowly down into the trees, walking on into the darkness until the harping could be heard no more.

EPILOGUE

"Shan! Shan!"
The wild cry arose in the cold dawn as if from great depths. Asper, blind and still half-asleep, had to lean over the man writhing under blankets she'd laid over him the night before to make sure the shout that had awakened her had come from his throat.
She stayed to soothe, but Narm Tamaraith sprang to his feet, hurling her aside without even noticing her, to stare wildly around into the mists cloaking the tilted, scorched

campground.
The blackened skeletons of wagons leaned crazily here and there. Off in the distance, at the far corner of the camp, stood two intact wagons and a shifting, snorting group of close-hobbled horses, flanked by sleepy-eyed men who gripped drawn swords and stared back at him.
Narm's gaze went reluctantly to where there were no mists, above the rocks, to where a ball of white flame still spun in midair.
"No," he whimpered, staring at it, as warm and shapely arms embraced him from behind. 7
"She's gone to Mystra," Asper said into his ear. "She . . . spoke of you, ere she died."
"No!" Narm screamed. "Noooo!" He burst into tears and wrenched free, running wildly toward the whirling ball of flame.
"Too high to hurl yourself into," Asper murmured, pursuing him, "but a nasty fall from those rocks, if you hurl yourself!"
The young mage promptly stumbled and fell, and she toppled over him. Narm did not rise but lay on his face in a daze.
He did not know how long it was ere he found his feet again, and cared less, but as Narm sobbed and reached again for the softly spinning flames, a fat, unlovely, and unshaven figure wrapped in a blanket trudged up beside him and laid an iron hand on his shoulder.
"Nay, lad," Mirt growled, "don't. That's not the way of a hero. Heroes get up and go on, and endure. Heroes remember fallen comrades and try to carry on with what they were striving for, ere they died. Heroes keep at it."
Narm stared at him and screamed, "I suppose heroes don't cry, either?" Tears rose to choke him again, and he doubled over, weeping.
Mirt plucked Narm off his feet, swaying and staggering a little from the pain and stiffness of his wounds, and hugged him like a bear. "Ah, nay, lad, there you have it wrong again.

'Tis villains who feel no remorse. Heroes cry. Ah, yes."
In a tower far from where white flames spun in midair, a Red Wizard passed a weary hand over his eyes and let his scrying-crystal go dark. "So passes the spellfire-witch. Her fate surprises me not—but that she lasted this long does."
The dark-robed cleric across the table nodded. "This Year of the Prince has proved eventful indeed for all Faerun. Let us hope that relative peace will prevail next year. Our prayers seem to indicate thus."
"Oh?" the mage asked politely. Privately he thought that priests' prayers always indicated whatever the priests wanted them to, but he might need the support of this fool Indrel in time to come, so ...
"The signs Lady Shar has sent her holy faithful match what Lord Bane indicates to us," Indrel of Bane said a trifle stiffly, as if he sensed the wizard's skepticism. "The gods feel fair Faerun hath seen troubles enough, and 'tis time for relative quiet. In such calm we can build our might, and be ready to triumph in the next strife—spellfire or no spellfire."
"As will others who oppose us," the Red Wizard pointed out, recalling something about the next prophecy of Alaundo having to do with "gods walking among men." "Peace, you say?"
"The Lord Bane says," the priest said firmly, "and you would do well to remember that—" His voice deepened into solemn thunder, and the mage joined in, to chant with him in unison: "The Lord Bane sees all and guides us unerringly!"
"To supremacy," the priest added, completing the holy saying alone. He looked curiously across the table to see why the Red Wizard had fallen silent and saw the mage frowning, gaze fixed on the dark sphere of crystal.
"Spellfire," the Red Wizard whispered, remembering what the scrying-sphere had just shown him. "I'd give a lot to be able to wield power like that." He lifted his gaze to fix the priest with eyes that blazed with dark fire and added, "You might tell Lord Bane that."

Staring back at him, the priest suddenly shivered.
Alustriel looked up, caught the distant Harper's "safe ahead" wave, and saluted him with a wan smile. The stealthy ring of Harpers had been riding guard around them for days now, keeping distant and often hidden in the surrounding trees.
She traded glances with Mirt and Asper. Silence reigned, and none of them felt like breaking it—not with Narm riding uncaring in their midst, little more than a grief-ridden shell of a man.
The dark and endless High Forest lay close by to the east. They were still some days shy of Silverymoon, where the High Lady intended to give Narm Tamaraith a new face and a new name.
If he lived to desire either. He'd refused to eat or drink these past three days and sagged loose-limbed in his saddle, held there only by the harness Mirt had rigged. Narm rarely looked up, and when he walked, stumbled along like a man near collapse.
"If we have to start changing him," Asper murmured to her man, as their mounts slithered down a treacherous slope and they watched Narm's head bounce and loll," 'twill be your turn, m'lord."
"If we have to start changing him," Mirt replied, "I move we send him into spellsleep, lash him to a horse like a grainsack, and gallop the rest of the way. I grow weary of this."
"Easy, Old Wolf," Asper whispered reprovingly. "How would you feel, if you lost me?"
"Like tearing apart half Faerun barehanded," Mirt growled. "I'd do it, too, not drift off into don't-care land."
Alustriel sighed. "Water ahead, says the Harpers' handtalk. We should rest the horses."
The water proved to be a tranquil little pool where a brook slithered down rocks and paused before vanishing through more rocks into a cascade they could hear rather than see.
Asper steadied the silent Narm as he knelt, lapped up water,

then plunged in both his hands and washed his face.
He looked up, met Asper's smile with a twisted half-smile of his own, water running off his chin, turned, and sprinted for the rocks at the bottom of the pool.
"Narm!" Asper snapped, whirling to run after him. "Narm!"
A Harper sprang out of the trees, racing along the rocks, but the young wizard was faster. He bounded over the ridge and hurled himself into the air beyond without a sound.
Asper heard the thud of his body striking rock below and came to a halt on the edge of the cliff, breathing heavily. "Alustriel," she said grimly, "I'm sorry. I—I failed you."
"No," the High Lady replied softly, squeezing Asper's arm as she strode past. "Narm failed himself."
Alustriel looked down at the crumpled form on the rocks below, saw it groan and move, sighed, and stepped out into empty air.
Asper made a startled, wordless sound behind her as Alustriel plunged down. Her descent was swift, but her landing feather-soft.
"That was foolish," she said tenderly, kneeling beside the sprawled mage. "You might have killed yourself."
"I'm trying to," he gasped bloodily, not turning his head. "I don't want to live. Just leave me."
"No, Narm Tamaraith," the High Lady said firmly, "I'll not do that. I think you'll want to live again."
Silver fire crackled from her fingertips, and she touched him where his bones were shattered.
Narm jerked and shuddered under that healing yet searing touch, then stiffened and gasped, "S-shan?"
Out of the silver flames washing through him a ghostly face had arisen. It became a very familiar head and shoulders .. . and Shandril smiled at him.
Narm never even noticed Alustriel slipping away or that he was crawling forward on arms and legs that had been snapped like twigs but moments before. He reached out through sudden tears. "Shan?"

Shandril smiled at her man. "Yes, Narm, love. Tis me. By Mystra's will I can be wherever spellfire or silver fire is awakened."
Narm sobbed, still reaching for her, knowing there was nothing he could hold or caress, but wanting—wanting so much to—
"Mystra brought me to Gorstag, across all the miles betwixt here and the Rising Moon," Shandril told him softly, "and promised me I could whisper to you whenever I desired. All's right for me now, and I want it to be right for you, too."
Narm swallowed. "How can that be?" he wept. "Without you?"
"Listen to me, beloved," Shandril told him, drifting nearer. "I want you to do something for me. I need you to do it for yourself."
"What?" Narm whispered, trying to touch her.
"Find the right girl, get married, and have a long and happy life, as far away from adventure as possible."
Narm shook his head, smiling bitterly, his face bright with tears. "How by all the gods will I ever know who the 'right girl' is? You were the right girl!"
Shandril smiled a little sadly, and replied, "The one you'll be happy with, my spell-lion."
Narm shook his head, lips trembling. "What if she's another shapechanging monster, or I've just chosen wrong?"
"Well, then," Shandril told him softly, "I'll just have to come back and haunt you."
She drifted up and kissed him, then—a cold, cold tingling that crackled like spellfire against his lips—then was gone. He was staring at empty air, blinking away fresh tears.
He rode alone, silent all the rest of that day, and cried into the firelight that night. Three different hands silently reached out to comfort him but said not a word to disturb his memories.
Narm remembered that, too, down the passing years.
Hand of Fire